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ABSTRACT

This document presents the Educational Excellence Network's third annual report card on the progress of education reform in the United States. Despite much activity, the report assigns reform efforts for 1995-96 the overall grade of C, which is the same grade given for the previous year. Part 1 presents data on academic achievement in American public schools and takes the position that dismal academic performance is the result of innercity schools, the mediocrity of many public schools, and the lack of suitable challenge and expectations for students. Part 2 distinguishes between "content" standards and "performance" standards and discusses problems in setting consistent standards and determining real accountability. The third part differentiates between "systemic reform" (in which federal or state governments set standards and shoulder primary responsibility for orchestrating implementation) and "reinvention" (in which the delivery of public education is opened up to a wide array of providers), and provides a rationale for the reinvention model. The discussion describes progress made in the charter-school, contract-management, and school-choice movements. Part 4 indicates that pedagogical dogma excludes practices that are teacher-directed or that involve direct instruction. The whole-language approach in California, the standards proposed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and "natural" learning are offered as examples of instructional approaches that shut out "instructivism" programs. The final chapter expresses the opinion that the current federal role in education is archaic, that the federal government subsidizes complacent establishment interests rather than those of consumers and reformers, and that the federal government buttresses educational dogmas that are often politically motivated and frequently at odds with the concerns of parents and communities. (Contains 34 references.) (LMI)

ED 399 676

Educational Excellence Network
SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

EDUCATION REFORM 1995-1996

by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch

A Report from the Educational Excellence Network
to its Education Policy Committee and the American People

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Report Card on American Education

Name: U.S. Education Reform

School Year: 1995 - 1996

Subjects	Final Grade
Course-Taking	B+
Achievement	
History	F
Geography	C+
Standards	B-
Reinventing Education	B
Instruction	Consider a Different Approach
Reforming the Federal Role	F

Overall Average: C

Graded by: Educational Excellence Network

Grading Scale:

A	Outstanding Performance
B	Good Work
C	Limping Along
D	Really Weak
F	Abysmal

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August 1996

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Dedicated to the memory of

Arthur E. Bestor

1908–1994

Author of *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools* (1953) and *The Restoration of Learning: A Program for Redeeming the Unfulfilled Promise of American Education* (1955), and a founder of the Council for Basic Education.

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Foreword

This is our third annual report card on the progress of education reform in the United States. Despite much activity—improvement on some measures, decline on others—the average grade this year is the same as last: a flat C.

As before, our purpose is to evaluate major developments on several key reform fronts, together with evidence of student and school performance. The report includes major sections on achievement, on standards, on "reinventing" education, and on the federal role. Those parallel last year's main elements—and the continuing priorities of the Educational Excellence Network. This year we also appraise the nature and quality of instruction, in recognition of the inexorable linkage between policy reform and reform in the classroom.

In preparing this report, we received invaluable help from Theodor Rebarber and Gregg Vanourek, as well as Diana Schloegel and Sheryl McMillian. The manuscript was ably copyedited by Anne Himmelfarb, and its distribution was organized by Rebecca Arrick. Our sincere thanks to them all.

We're also grateful to members of the Network's Education Policy Committee (EPC), all of whom are named at the end of this report and many of whom contributed quotes and comments that appear throughout it. Their comments do not always agree with our conclusions—and the reader deserves the benefit of both. Except for these signed remarks, the opinions expressed in this document belong to the coauthors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of EPC members, whose ranks were enhanced this year by the addition of former California state senator Gary K. Hart.

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Diane Ravitch

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, we launched the Educational Excellence Network (EEN) with a score of like-minded scholars and educators. Those of us who met at Teachers College in 1981 wanted to express our concern about the parlous state of American education. The famous SAT-score decline was by then well known, having been revealed in 1975; two years later, a distinguished panel of Americans concluded that it was a real decline and attributed it mainly to lessened emphasis on careful reading and writing, a serious contraction in the assignment of homework, and a ballooning of insubstantial electives across the curriculum. In addition, federal studies in the late 1970s had reported sharp declines in enrollment and achievement in mathematics, science, and foreign languages. And yet, in the view of those who joined the fledgling Network, little was happening at any level to reverse these troubling trends. At the time, ours were voices in the wilderness, crying out for academic standards and a renewed commitment to rigorous teaching and learning.

Two years after the birth of EEN, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*. To put it mildly, this bombshell awakened parents, educators, governors, legislators, and the press to the low expectations prevalent in U.S. schools and to the vital connection between the quality of education and the quality of life in our society. Its warning of "a rising tide of mediocrity" helped launch what came to be called the excellence movement, which included a mass of other commissions, studies, and reports, all pressing for higher standards and stiffer graduation requirements.

We recall this background now because, during the past couple of years, there has been a concerted effort by a small group of educationists to belittle the *Nation at Risk* report; to assert that it falsified conditions; and to charge that it was part of a calculated right-wing conspiracy to undermine public education and prepare the ground for vouchers. The late Ted Bell, who appointed the National Commission on Excellence in

Education, must have been bemused by these charges. He was as stalwart a champion of public education as one could find. But he was also a staunch believer that public education needed higher academic standards and would improve once such standards were put in place and taken seriously.

Despite the glum news and the low marks for education reform that fill much of this report, we also think it is important to note one of the sterling achievements of the excellence movement. Southern governors like Dick Riley of South Carolina, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, and Bill Clinton of Arkansas took the *Nation at Risk* warning seriously and raised graduation requirements. In time, more than forty states did so. What happened as a result? Plenty. Enough to warrant a "B+" for course-taking, an honors grade, the highest mark we give on this year's report card.

Recall that the single most important recommendation of the National Commission on Excellence was that all high-school graduates should take a core academic curriculum including (at least) four years of English, three years of social studies, three years of science, three years of mathematics, and one half-year of computer studies. In addition, the commission recommended two years of foreign-language study for the college bound. Not a bad diet for a high-school graduate who is eligible to vote on his or her eighteenth birthday.

But among the high-school graduates of 1982, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 2.1 percent had taken all of the recommended courses, including computer studies and foreign language; even among the college bound, only 4 percent had done so. In light of these dismal statistics, many must have concluded that the commission's recommendations were pie-in-the-sky. (We, however, firmly dissented and have steadfastly supported the states in their efforts to raise expectations.)

Consider what happened. By 1992, 29.4 percent of all high school graduates had taken the recommended array of academic courses, including two years of a foreign language and half a year of computer studies. Omit the half-year of computer studies (since in most schools, computer use is integrated across the curriculum), and the proportions rise from 8.8 percent in 1982 to 36.9 percent in 1992. These are nonincremental changes and nontrivial improvements. Standards really do make a difference. They actually induce people to change their behavior.

Also encouraging are enrollment figures in advanced math and science courses, which have risen sharply for all groups—racial and ethnic, male and female. The proportion of black students who study geometry, for instance, doubled from 30 percent in 1982 to 60 percent in 1992. Hispanic students made similar gains. Enrollments for boys and girls in all advanced courses showed large gains; by 1992, equal numbers had stud-

ied trigonometry and calculus; more girls than boys studied algebra II, geometry, biology, and chemistry; and only in physics were there more male than female students.

We find these trends heartening and attribute them to changes spurred by *A Nation at Risk*. They are also changes that the Educational Excellence Network has steadily supported since its inception, based on our bedrock (and we think self-evident) belief that students are likelier to learn subjects that they have studied. We also believe that higher academic standards are good for young people (who rise to meet expectations) and good for society (by adding to its stock of intelligent, thoughtful citizens). And we have long believed, contrary to a cherished shibboleth of the education profession, that higher standards for students would not lead to an increase in the dropout rate. In fact, we surmised that many youngsters dropped out not because school was too hard but because they correctly understood that dumbed-down courses in the general track were a waste of their time. When standards and graduation requirements rose, they responded by taking the courses, not by dropping out. Indeed, the dropout rate has been steadily declining during this period of rising expectations.

So, reviewing the changes of the decade and the results of the excellence movement, we are encouraged. Clearly, higher expectations have benefited many youngsters by showing respect for their capacity for learning.

Yet we are not prepared to resign the assignment that we undertook in 1981. The job is only half done. Some trends are worsening: the percentage of public secondary school teachers, for example, who report that weapons possession by students is a significant problem in their schools nearly doubled from 1990–91 to 1993–94. As for academics, we must recognize that while more than three-fifths of high school graduates now proceed directly to college, barely two-fifths of them were in the academic track in high school—and even more were in the abominable "general" track, which is neither academic nor vocational. Consider, too, that only 56.9 percent of these same graduates took the academic core courses that the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended as "basic" for college-bound students. The most typical course of study in 1992, followed by 72.8 percent of that year's graduates, was four years of English, three years of social studies (a grab bag of miscellaneous courses in most districts), two years of science, and two years of math. What these figures tell us, in addition to the heartening

We will never solve the serious problems we have in public education unless we first realistically identify what and where they are. It's up to all of us in the profession to accept the challenge of setting higher standards, holding students to higher expectations, and running public schools with zero tolerance for mediocrity.

John A. Murphy

trends, is that we are sending more and more youngsters to college who have not been adequately prepared in high school. Is it any wonder that remediation rates in college are rising?

Any number of indicators—remediation rates, test scores, surveys of employers—suggest that the battle for educational excellence is far from over. Many more young sters can meet standards of excellence if we adults are prepared to do our part as parents, teachers, principals, board members, governors, legislators, employers, and citizens. Children don't create the expectations or shape the institutions; adults do.

Despite efforts by a handful of apologists to persuade the public that student achievement is better than ever, businesses that hire young people—and see their inadequate preparation—beg to differ. So do colleges and legislatures. A report prepared for the "summit" of governors and business leaders at Palisades, New York, in March showed that many employers still encounter difficulty hiring skilled workers. In 1994, about 20 percent of all businesses were providing remedial training programs for their employees. Nynex had to test 60,000 applicants in order to fill 5,000 jobs, and a Michigan company, the report states, "needed through 1500 applicants to find 80 who could handle their demanding entrance requirements."

Basic skills are of course necessary in the world of work, but they're no longer sufficient. Today's high-performance workplace typically seeks candidates who possess strong academic records, the ability to think and solve problems, good communication skills, high motivation, readiness for teamwork, a strong work ethic, and sound character.

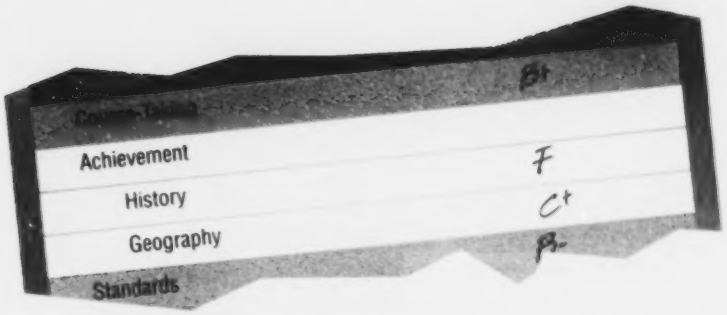
The jobs will be there. Will the students be prepared?

Saul Cooperman

These qualities are important for success in all of life, not just in work. Youngsters need a strong preparation in history and civics, art and literature, mathematics and science, as well as command of a foreign language. Those who develop skill and knowledge in the academic disciplines are also likely to develop the skills in problem-solving and communication that are so important for work and citizenship.

High-school graduates should have the strong academic core recommended by the Excellence Commission thirteen years ago. They also need the personal skills that enable them to use their knowledge well in higher education, the workplace, and their private and civic lives.

Until that day dawns, education reformers still have work to do.



Part I: Achievement

"Don't Know Much About History"

Encouraging as the course-taking trends are, new reports this year about student performance in history and geography remind us that actual academic achievement remains far from what it should be. Various surveys show that students even finish college without a solid grounding in the most basic elements of American government and civic life. At a time when there is renewed attention to civil society, our young adults know far too little about the institutions and traditions of American society.

Until we can show measurable progress to indicate that students are attaining higher levels of skills and understanding, as demanded by today's workplace and society, student performance must be rated an "F." By not maintaining their skills and knowledge relative to society, students are falling further behind. That should be the overriding finding of the report card.

William J. Hume

According to the 1994 assessment of history by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), our only reliable national gauge of student achievement, six out of seven eighth graders are not proficient in their understanding of American history, and 39 percent are not aware of even the most basic facts of our nation's history. Their performance alone warrants a failing grade. Even more alarming, however, is that 57 percent of high-school seniors register "below basic" in their knowledge of American history. These uninformed young people are now voters. We cannot give a passing mark to this dismal performance.

I think you've got a serious case of grade inflation.

Gary K. Hart

The results in geography were better but still far from praiseworthy. A grade of "C+" is appropriate. Three out of four seniors are less

than proficient in challenging high-school subject matter and 30 percent do not possess even a rudimentary understanding of geography. Yet when we consider that geography is not even offered in many schools, student performance was better than we expected. Those results may reflect the test content, which mainly avoided old-fashioned "place" geography and tended to favor questions about environmental issues, which students might have learned about in classes on environmental studies or from TV newscasts.

With the "Don't Worry, Be Happy" crowd working at full steam, the effort to make American education better is under constant attack by folks who are content with business as usual. Thankfully, most of our hard-working school people see through it all.

Jeanne Allen

Last year we summarized the results from the 1994 NAEP reading assessment, including a significant drop in achievement among high-school seniors. Hence we do not give reading achievement a new grade at this time. But the Education Department recently issued a more detailed analysis of NAEP reading results that contains some interesting tidbits. As in history and geography, students' reading achievement is substantially higher in private schools than in public schools, even when comparing students whose parents have the same educational attainment. Further, the students who seem to benefit most from a private education are those whose parents are at lower educational levels, suggesting that private education is helping to expand access to equal educational opportunity. The detailed report also shows that the big federal compensatory program known as Title I has not done much to help low-income youngsters reach adequacy in reading. Sixty-five percent of eighth graders participating in Title I still read below the "basic" level in 1994.

The NCES report on reading was misleading. To evaluate progress attributable to schooling, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development compared the differences between the older and younger groups. U.S. schools made the least progress even though their per-student costs (adjusted for purchasing power) were the highest among affluent countries.

Herbert J. Walberg

In June, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published new analyses of the international reading literacy assessment given to fourth and ninth graders in thirty-two nations in 1991. American students did well on this measure. Our nine-year-olds ranked second (behind Finland), and our thirteen-year-olds scored third (behind Finland and Sweden) Why did young Americans do well on this assessment while performing so poorly on NAEP reading tests? The international test reported averages; unlike NAEP, it was not based on standards of how well students at those ages ought to be able to read. Moreover,

this assessment primarily tested basic reading skills—which receive a lot of attention in American classrooms—rather than more sophisticated forms of comprehension. (One interesting point: U.S. students also watch more television than children in the other thirty-one nations.)

The Example of California

California has had especially good reason to be concerned about academic achievement. Certainly the NAEP finding that its fourth graders ranked nearly last in reading was a blow. But the California Higher Education Policy Center recently reported some further cause for worry:

- Almost half the entering freshmen in the California State University system in 1994 needed remedial instruction in either reading or mathematics. The percentage requiring remediation has been growing for five consecutive years.
- During the 1993–94 academic year, the state's community colleges spent $300 million (11 percent of their total budget) on remediation for 169,000 students.
- The state ranks fortieth in per-pupil spending, allocating $4,500 to educate each public-school pupil (as compared to $22,000 to house a prisoner!).

Should felons not be imprisoned? Should $22,000 be spent on each sixth grader? Doesn't the research show that spending and performance are hardly correlated at all?

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

Delaine Eastin, the state's superintendent of public instruction, has called for improved state standards and clear graduation requirements, as well as expansion of California's "Golden State" examination system; she would like the test to serve as the basis for admission to the state higher-education system. Her proposals have encountered strong opposition from the California Teachers Association, which insists that higher college admission standards linked to exams would increase the dropout rate.

The union made the same argument in New Jersey in 1984. It didn't happen.

Saul Cooperman

The seriousness of the state's education problems was illustrated by the first administration of the Golden State examination in reading and composition. Some twenty thousand students—mostly eleventh graders—took this ninety-minute test, which asked students to read an article and write an essay about it approximately seven hundred to one thou-

Limited remediation work in college is sometimes appropriate. Re-entry students who haven't taken a math course in many years and recent immigrants whose English writing skills may be weak, for example, may need some justifiable assistance.

Gary K. Hart

sand words in length. Although official results have not been released, apparently only 8 percent of the students are able to read and write at a college level.

Superintendent Eastin and the California State Board of Education are on the right track. Students get high-school diplomas even though they cannot read, write, or calculate well, and then require remediation in college, which is an immense waste of money and time for all concerned. This system urgently needs fixing. Graduation standards, promotion standards, and entry standards for college must be strengthened. It is worth spending more if students are actually expected to learn more. Absent real standards, however, the system is certain to remain profligate and ineffectual.

A Three-Headed Problem

Aside from the "recentered" SAT, almost all the hard evidence we have seen confirms that student performance in U.S. schools remains far from what it ought to be. What we used to call a crisis has become a chronic problem of underperformance, in which the abilities and talents of most young Americans are persistently underchallenged and underdeveloped. Many students are also undermotivated. As Laurence Steinberg writes in his perceptive 1996 book, *Beyond the Classroom*, "An extremely high proportion of American high school students do not take school, or their studies, seriously."

The result is not a single problem of underperformance, but a threefold one:

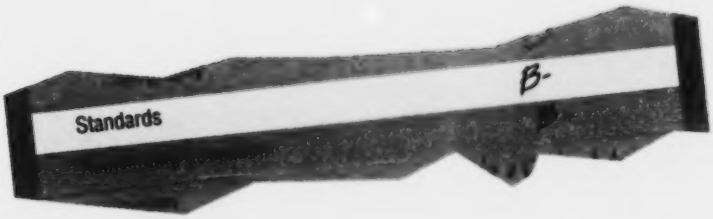
- *First*, there is the disgrace of inner-city schools, where extraordinary numbers of our poorest children fail and/or drop out, thus guaranteeing a social and economic disaster for themselves as well as for our nation's once-great cities.
- *Second*, there is the abiding mediocrity of many ordinary schools attended by ordinary kids across the country.
- *Third*, there is the lack of suitable challenge and expectations for many very bright youngsters.

Despite all that, some Americans obtain a first-rate education. But their numbers are far too small—in the single digits according to much NAEP evidence. "Very few

American pupils are performing anywhere near where they could be performing," says Al Shanker. As the veteran education journalist Tom Toch puts it, "Public schools are doing a better job of educating kids than ever before. . . . But the vast majority of American students are still educated at too low a level."

We mostly agree. And the results are all around us. Consider the Roper Center's April 1996 survey of college seniors for *The American* newspaper. It showed—on questions based on what E.D. Hirsch says a fifth grader should know—that fewer than half know how many U.S. senators there are; fewer than one in ten can trace "government of the people, by the people, for the people" to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; just one in five knows who wrote *The Republic*; only one in four can identify Nazi Germany's two major allies during World War II; and barely half can name any four countries in Africa. Those are *college seniors*, mind you.

No less disturbing were the findings of a recent poll measuring political knowledge among adults, commissioned by the *Washington Post*, the Kaiser Foundation, and Harvard University. Nearly half the survey participants did not know (in late 1995) who has "the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not"; 40 percent could not name the vice president of the United States; three-quarters did not know how many years a senatorial term lasts; and only 24 percent could name both senators from their state. The *Washington Post* lamented this lack of political knowledge because "information is one of democracy's golden keys: without basic facts about the players and the rules of the game, Americans tune out politics and turn off to voting." These are insights that we wish were broadly shared by education elites who prize "process skills" far more than knowledge and "mere facts." Both count.



Part II: Standards
Much Talk, Not Much Action

The most visible recent event on the standards front was the much-ballyhooed "education summit" held in March under the joint sponsorship of IBM and the National Governors Association. The attendees renewed their vows of fealty to standards, assessment, and accountability as the central themes of education reform, and the blue-chip crowd of CEOs and governors made various solemn-sounding commitments. We welcome the rhetorical consensus around standards. Indeed, we were delighted to hear that message echoed by governors, business leaders, even the president. Those of us who were once lonely advocates now find ourselves in a surprisingly crowded agora, hearing our words repeated authoritatively as the conventional wisdom of the day.

Sadly, the earlier commitment by the business community to educational reform is being dissipated by time and impatience. I hear more rhetoric than I see strong actions at the community or state level. In Arizona, the business community simply disappeared when the debate over revised standards was undertaken, leaving the issue of student performance as a business concern without a voice.

Rick C. Lavis

But we are suspicious of easy victories. When everyone shouts hurrah for standards, you have to wonder if they're all talking about the same thing. And after reviewing a goodly number of state standards, we wonder if standards-based reform is actually making much headway at that crucial level. Some of them are excellent, but others are feeble and vague. In "language arts," especially, many of the state standards are as vacuous as the national English standards. Thus the "B-" grade for progress in this area. If few governors or state departments of education can tell the difference between measurable standards and empty rhetoric, the battle is far from over

Two Kinds of Standards

Part of the problem lies in the ill-understood distinction between "content" standards and "performance" standards. Almost everyone at the summit was focused exclusively on content standards, which describe what ought to be learned, i.e., the skills, knowledge, and competencies in a particular subject that we'd like children to possess at certain grade levels. These are necessary as a foundation for curriculum, instruction, textbook selection, materials development, teacher training, etc.

But content standards do *not* answer the question "How good is good enough?" A content standard might say, for example, that an eighth-grade math student should "know how to solve multistep problems involving the multiplication and division of fractions." (That's actually more specific than most state content standards we've seen!) But that says nothing about how hard those problems should be, how many steps they involve, or how many times (if ever) the student needs to get the right answer. It's possible to take that content standard and devise either a very easy or an extremely challenging passing level. Thus the content standard is necessary but insufficient as a basis for education reform. Only when student performance standards are specified do we have actionable education standards.

The analogy with sports, in which there are both content and performance standards, is useful. A content standard might say that "eighth graders should be able to run a mile." The performance standard would say how fast. Without the performance standard, one could argue that a leisurely half-hour stroll constitutes running a mile. So long as that possibility exists, we obviously won't be getting students into shape via the application of standards.

The debate over standards is unconnected to implementation. It is like much of the rest of education reform: the reformers declare victory when some policy gets adopted, then walk away from the real work which is in the trenches, i.e., the classrooms of America.

Rick C. Lavis

Or consider the flexible performance standards applied to the National Teachers Examination (NTE) by the several states. Candidates taking the biology test, for example, which is scored from 250 to 990, will pass in Ohio and Missouri with a score of 480, while those in Pennsylvania require a 580 and those in Connecticut a lofty 730. Meanwhile, the public is misled by assurances that would-be teacher candidates have "passed" the NTE without full information about elastic passing standards.

Yet the summit seemed virtually oblivious to serious performance standards, to tests and

assessments of performance, and to the consequences that must follow if standard' are to make any real difference in our schools.

The draft national standards emerging from the various subject-matter groups similarly neglect performance standards, tests, and consequences. So do most state standards. This explains our suspicion that the rhetorical victory of "higher standards" may turn out to have little traction in the real world.

Two Kinds of Summit

We observed a striking difference between the 1996 Palisades summit and its 1989 predecessor in Charlottesville, especially with respect to the role of the federal government. While the earlier summit was convened and led by President Bush, the recent one was the work of governors and business leaders and had little federal presence. Yes, Secretary Riley was there as a "resource" but he played no overt role. Yes, President Clinton delivered an excellent address to the summit-goers, but he was an invited guest and actually played a lesser role in Palisades than he had in Charlottesville, when he was governor of Arkansas.

At this summit, Uncle Sam sat on the bench. Business leaders were equal partners with governors. Neither group wants a more assertive federal role, and the president, at least that day, seemed to agree. We must note, however, that while business leaders' impatience with the slow pace of reform has long been palpable, these same captains of industry often settle for mild consensus-type reforms (e.g., technology, content standards) and shy away from controversial strategies for actually changing the definitions, power relations, and ground rules of American education.

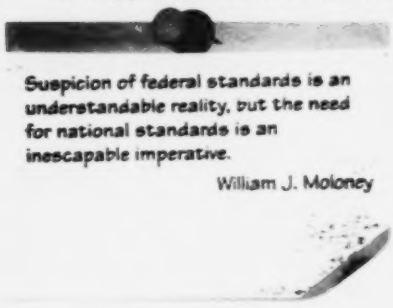
Outside of the politically brave work of a handful of business leaders in places such as the Twin Cities, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis on behalf of public- and private-school choice, the business community has been as much of a blob as the Blob itself.

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

The quest for consensus dominated the Palisades summit. Whatever was agreed upon had to include everyone, Democrat and Republican, governor and CEO. And it couldn't annoy too many of the prominent establishmentarians (including the heads of both national teacher unions) who had been invited as "resource persons." That's why the discussion was confined almost exclusively to content standards (and technology). That's why little was said about performance standards, assessment, or serious accountability. That's why nothing was said about organizational and political barriers to standards-based reform or strategies for surmounting these.

Setting Standards

Perhaps the stickiest question in the domain of standards is who should set them. There appears to be a broad consensus—one that we strongly affirm—that the federal government should not. There is simply too little confidence in Washington's impartiality and competence to entrust it with such a job. Doing so, moreover, would risk politicizing the school curriculum, threaten to turn voluntary standards into government mandates, and disrupt a basic constitutional arrangement that plainly makes education a state responsibility.



Suspicion of federal standards is an understandable reality, but the need for national standards is an inescapable imperative.

William J. Moloney

Virtually every one of the fifty states is presently embarked on a course of setting standards, developing assessments, and aligning tests. They're mostly going about it separately and are at various stages in the process. And they sometimes have very different notions of what's important and "how good is good enough."

Is this a splendid instance of creative federalism in action or an immense source of inefficiency? Based on what we've seen, education standards set by the several states are uneven at best. Yet leaving them to our 15,000 local school districts, or our 110,000 public and private schools, would be worse. Indeed, if local districts were disposed to set and enforce high education standards, the nation would not be "at risk" today. Those districts enjoyed a century or more of local control during which they could have done precisely that . . . and didn't.

The summit implicitly rejected both federal and local standard-setting. It took for granted that states are the proper locus of this activity. It suggested—and the National Governors Association this summer endorsed—the creation of a nebulous, new nongovernmental entity to serve as a clearinghouse for state efforts in this field.

The underlying judgment seems to us correct: frontline responsibility for setting standards belongs with the states. We also share the governors' insistence that they be able to compare their states' standards and, more importantly, their students' and schools' performance with those of other states, with those of the nation as a whole, and with those of other countries. In the core subjects of the curriculum, they should also have convenient mechanisms for pooling or exchanging standards. In reading, writing, math, and science, after all, academic standards are mostly intrinsic to the subject itself, not to some idiosyncratic decision made in Lansing or Santa Fe. Alcoa CEO Paul O'Neill eloquently remarked at the summit that nine-year-olds should be able to read no matter where they live; why, he asked, does each state have to figure that out for itself?

It also makes no sense for Alcoa and other companies to have to evaluate new hires based on whether they have met expectations in Ohio English, Oregon math, or Vermont science. Further, looking at what states have produced to date, we find a motley collection, uneven in quality and rigor. (A recent state survey by the National Education Goals Panel reports that while forty states claim to use their assessment systems for "school accountability," in only two states do school test results carry any consequences for staff.)

U.S. high-school graduates do not master a well-defined body of academic content and skills. A diploma may indicate little more than seat time. To the extent that educators are working to reach ever-changing, idiosyncratic goals, schools are less comparable across time and with one another. Without standards or benchmarks, there can be little accountability.

Herbert J. Walberg

Some content standards, like Virginia's, stand out for their rigor and precision, but Virginia's are the exception. In most states, the standards are typically vague, overly broad, and undemanding. One example among many is the draft "late high school learning benchmark" in history that Illinois released for public comment in June, saying that students reaching this benchmark will be able to "compare and contrast varying interpretations of major events in selected periods of history." That's so nebulous, so devoid of both real content and actual performance standards, so utterly lacking in anything deserving to be called a "benchmark," as to provide no useful guidance to teachers, parents, test-makers, policy-makers, textbook publishers, or schools of education.

As long as there are powerful vested interests in control of so much of education, the laudable goal of consistent standards for all cannot be achieved justly. I'm content to let states reign sovereign on this one, with the only national presence for standards being a strengthened, more frequent, and much-reported NAEP.

Jeanne Allen

An even more difficult challenge for developers of state standards is comparability. For many years, parents, business leaders, elected officials, and other citizens have sought clear and timely information regarding how well students are performing in relation to students outside their state or locality. If states lack the ability to benchmark their standards to one another and to the country as a whole, the resulting incoherence in student expectations will mean maximum confusion and minimal impact. Mark Musick of the Southern Regional Education Board has shown how low some states have set their passing levels in core subjects relative to the standard of "proficient" in those same subjects set by the National Assessment Governing

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Board. In some jurisdictions that report as many as 60 or 70 percent of their students "passing" the state standard, fewer than 20 percent reach NAEP's "proficient" level.

National Standards?

What might best assist the states to compare, contrast, and benchmark their standards beyond their own borders? This may be the central quandary facing the standards movement today. The voluntary national standards recently developed by various professional groups are clearly not the final word, although several of those projects did better work than the editorial pages let on, and the better ones can benefit state standard-writers and test-makers. All eight federally funded standard-setting projects have now published their products (as have a number of subject-based organizations that did not receive federal support). Some are worth having. Others are absurd.

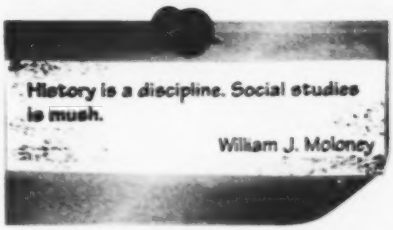
The standards completed during the past year—science, foreign languages, English, and revised history standards—are a mixed bag. Buried in the 262-page science document are some solid academic standards. But also found there are admonitions to teachers to place "less emphasis on' . . . student acquisition of information; . . . recitation of acquired knowledge; . . . maintaining responsibility and authority; . . . knowing scientific facts and information; . . . [and] providing answers to questions about science content."

The so-called English standards, or "Standards for the English Language Arts," as their developers prefer, are a travesty. In fact they contain no real standards for what most people think of as English. One page of vacuous instructional goals is all that can be found that resembles standards. The authors failed to mask their embarrassment about, if not downright hostility toward, standard English. Although no state should embrace such empty standards, portions of them have in fact already made their way into many state standards, and they are likely to find their way into education courses and textbooks as well.

The new foreign-language standards might actually be more useful to serious English teachers. They display a fair level of clarity regarding expectations for students. Yet their drafters also go too far in adopting fashionable "constructivist" instructional dogma. The standards pay vast amounts of attention to "cultural understanding," for example, but say essentially nothing about grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. This reticence is a shame because for many years foreign-language instruction could be counted upon to introduce youngsters to the conventions of language that had disappeared from most English classrooms. In true constructivist form, students are now expected to figure out for themselves the rules of language—or (most likely) never learn those rules.

As for history, by far the most debated of all the proposed national standards, the same group that published the widely panned first draft recently produced a revised set of U.S.- and world-history standards. These are much better, enough so that they afford a defensible foundation for the development of assessments, instructional materials, and state and local curricula. That does not mean they're free from controversy, or that we are pleased with every particular. But when we observe the abysmal quality of what passes for "social studies" in most U.S. schools today, and the wretched performance of American students on the 1994 NAEP U.S.-history assessment, we are convinced that the country has nowhere to go but up in this field.

In contrast to the U.S. history standards, which are sharply focused on the history of one nation, the world history standards are overwhelming in their reach. In a huge subject that calls for discerning judgment, the developers of the world history standards apparently could not bring themselves to establish clear priorities for what all students should know. Instead of identifying the most important events, themes, and ideas in world and western history, they offer up a curricular smorgasbord and leave overburdened teachers to select the dishes from a crowded buffet of cultures and civilizations. Few teachers are qualified to teach the vastly ambitious historical menu that is presented. Standards should help teachers decide not only what to teach, but also what to leave out. The world history standards are not helpful on that score.



Too Many Standards?

Outside the core subjects, we find that virtually every field that has ever elbowed its way into the curriculum is now trying to squeeze onto the standards bandwagon. The newly issued "Speaking, Listening, and Media Literacy Standards" are an example. (Must we now anticipate driver-ed standards, home-economics standards, and bachelor-living standards?) They wind up muddling the subject they're supposedly advancing. Here, for example, is the second of their twenty-three standards: "Effective communicators can demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the variables influencing the effectiveness of the components of the communication process."

Say what?

But if standards are finally becoming popular, even in nonacademic fields and for self-interested reasons, we have no real complaint. The trend suggests that many more people are recognizing that the world of the twenty-first century requires higher expec-

tations and stronger student performance. That is a leap forward in a profession that has long been standards-averse.

Viewed as a set, the recommended national standards that we now have are better than no standards at all. (Among the core academic subjects, only those for English are *worse* than none at all.) But virtually all of the standards suffer from shortcomings that will severely limit their impact on U.S. schools.

First, they mainly avoid any reference to performance standards, tests, and accountability strategies.

Second, their content is so ambitious, bulky, and discursive that they do not lend themselves to actual use, other than as reference books. They are more like encyclopedias of what is desirable than clear statements of priorities about what is most important for students to know and be able to do.

Third, there is no mechanism for continuous correction and revision of the standards. All of them can be improved and should be regularly revised in response to public reaction and field experience. Absent such revisions, they may soon become peculiar artifacts of the age rather than lasting guideposts for instruction.

If the national standards cannot meet the states' needs for solid content, clear performance expectations, serviceable comparisons, and accurate benchmarking, what could? We're a bit skeptical about the "entity" emerging from the summit, not because the concept is wrong but because the impulse to create a new outfit to provide information and technical assistance tacitly signals the failure of so many existing organizations. What, after all, is the reason for even *having* an Education Commission of the States if not to perform these functions? The National Education Goals Panel? The Council of Chief State School Officers? The National Governors Association itself? The landscape is littered with organizations that either tried and failed to promote standards-based education reform or avoided this briar patch altogether. So in the American spirit of creating new organizations rather than changing (or scrapping) unsatisfactory old ones, yet another "entity" will now compete for air time, conference-goers, printers' ink, and philanthropic dollars.

Fortunately, two existing organizations have a lot to offer standards-minded states. For starters, both contain real performance standards based on well-developed content standards.

The first is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in particular the "achievement levels" set by the National Assessment Governing Board as part of its supervision of NAEP. These are standards against which student achievement can actually be measured, compared, and reported (as we do in Part I of this report). NAEP pro-

vides both nationwide results in core subjects in grades four, eight, and twelve, and state-level results in those subjects and grade levels for which states volunteer to participate. Suitably reshaped (as the governing board has proposed), NAEP could also provide regular international comparisons in subjects that lend themselves to such treatment.

The second is the New Standards project, captained by Lauren Resnick and Marc Tucker and already involving a number of states and communities. Though assessments keyed to these "new standards" are just beginning, we're impressed by the standards themselves. Unlike the so-called English language arts standards, for example, Resnick and Tucker's standards in this subject include clear expectations for the conventions of language, i.e., grammar and spelling, as well as—believe it or not—a recommended reading list, which is anathema to the language-arts establishment.

In short, we don't think it necessary to reinvent this particular wheel to help states roll down the path to serious standards of their own. Both NAEP and New Standards have done quality work. (So have E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation and Hudson Institute's Modern Red Schoolhouse project, to mention two others.) We hope that the new "entity" will recognize, as it searches for models, that it makes better sense to stand on their shoulders than to start from scratch.

Should the states adopt NAEP? Can they legally? This is the issue. If not the feds, how do you get the states to enact high, rigorous content standards and equally rigorous performance standards?

Saul Cooperman

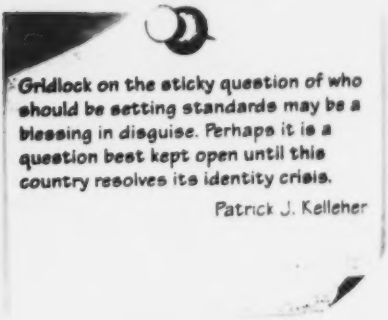
Real Accountability

Standards without assessments, as one state policy-maker noted recently, are "just so much paper." Yet not everyone agrees that external testing is needed. Some within the education establishment and on the political left object to "high stakes" accountability. On the right, some see any such testing as a foot in the door for a national (or micromanaged statewide) curriculum. Some see the specter of outcomes-based education wherever they look. Some are so keen on having parents make all education decisions that they overlook the possibility that there may be one or two things parents themselves don't know.

Until there are consequences linked to content and performance standards, they won't be taken seriously by the most critical players: students, parents, and teachers.

Gary K. Hart

Even when assessments are in place, until and unless consequences are real and tangible, behavior is not likely to change much. As Al Shanker and Laurence Steinberg remind us, incentives (and disincentives) for students are critical, since improved pupil motivation is an essential part of greater learning. According to a recent survey by MetLife, even students recognize this fact. Their severest criticism of the schools is that "they didn't make us work hard enough."


Gridlock on the sticky question of who should be setting standards may be a blessing in disguise. Perhaps it is a question best kept open until this country resolves its identity crisis.
Patrick J. Kelleher

Accountability for teachers is essential, too, given the discouraging finding by Public Agenda that public school principals and teachers, "far from being strong advocates for high-level learning in their own fields, . . . seem to downplay the importance of the very subjects they teach." And of course it's vital to ensure that all school professionals themselves possess fundamental academic skills. In that context, we're dismayed by the effort by some California teachers (aided by the National Education Association) to persuade the courts to invalidate the basic-skills competency test for teachers (known as CBEST) currently in use in that state. What's the point of going to school if teachers don't know how to read, write, and calculate basic mathematics? Can a teacher who is not literate be a good role model?

Still, we detect slight progress in harnessing serious consequences to test-based achievement. In the past year, Boston, Dade County, Baltimore, and the state of Maryland, among others, have announced plans to impose "high stakes" tied to performance on student achievement tests. According to the National Education Goals Panel survey of state assessment practices (in 1994–95), seventeen states claim that their assessments are now used to determine whether students have met high-school exit requirements. (Unfortunately, many of those requirements still resemble minimum standards such as sixth-grade literacy.)

Politically speaking, consequences for students, teachers, principals, and others are the most difficult part of standards-based education reform, as proven by GOALS 2000, which bars the use of federal funds to develop assessments used for promotion, graduation, retention-in-grade, or any other consequences. That's why imposition of consequences lags so far behind the development of content standards and assessments. But now, at least, we are beginning to hear discussion of consequences. Without them, education reform is just so much hot air.

Part III: Reinventing Education

Steady Progress

In our last report, we described two competing approaches to education reform: "systemic reform" and "reinvention." (We're ignoring the much-loved approach known as "things are fine, send more money" because it has nothing to do with reform.)

Reinvention, which we favor, made steady but uneven progress this year at state and local levels, while the systemic-reform model was dealt an important, if largely symbolic, defeat at the national level. A grade of "B" seems justified. Before reviewing the evidence, let us briefly recap the two approaches.

Systemic reform assumes that federal or state governments (or occasionally a large school system) not only set standards for academic and fiscal performance, but also shoulder primary responsibility for orchestrating the implementation of those standards by districts, schools, teachers, and even parents. Despite lip service to bottom-up change, the systemic model holds that reform is best accomplished through top-down mandates and uniform policies—such as so-called opportunity-to-learn standards—relating to teacher training, textbooks, school resources, and the promulgation of "best practices." The underlying assumption is that education can be thoroughly rationalized by a command-and-control system, that all schools should receive precisely the same marching orders from the top of the state or city authority structure. If everyone is following the same script written by the same experts, then the schools should, in theory, achieve outstanding results. The script (or, mandates and policies) is developed by a central-planning process drawn primarily from the ranks of established administrative leadership, approved interest groups, and other such "stakeholders." GOALS 2000, as originally enacted, largely embodied this approach.

We dubbed the second model reinvention because it involves a basic rethinking of what is meant by public education, akin to the conceptual shift of the "reinventing government" movement. While public authorities retain responsibility under this model (as

in systemic reform) for identifying academic and fiscal performance standards and holding people accountable for meeting them, government bureaucracies do not deliver the services, run the institutions, employ the people, or regulate the processes. Rather, the delivery of public education is opened up to a wide array of providers, including teacher cooperatives, parent and community groups, nonprofit and religious organizations, and private firms. To revert to our earlier metaphor, every school is expected to meet the same standards, but every school writes its own script for achieving excellence.

I don't think all virtue rests with the reinvention model. Identifying "best practices," adopting challenging state curriculum frameworks and textbooks, and developing mechanisms to highlight (and hopefully correct) differential opportunity-to-learn standards strike me as worthwhile strategies to pursue at the state level.

Gary K. Hart

In addition to its public funding, such education remains public in every sense that most citizens view as important: schools accept all comers, they charge no tuition, and—a significant point—they remain accountable to public authorities for their performance in relation to clear standards. This model minimizes bureaucracy and regulation because it is results-oriented. Policies used to implement it include independent public charter schools and management contracts.

One caveat is necessary: the reinventing model we favor is not a wide-open, unbridled free market. We reject the claim that the public has no interest or role in elementary or secondary education, and we disagree with those who believe that marketplace forces alone will provide suitable quality control. Such forces are necessary (and today largely absent), but they are insufficient for this purpose. Children should be free to attend the school of their parents' choice, and schools must be free to tailor their offerings to different kinds of students. Children should never be obliged to attend a school that's wrong for them and schools that cannot attract pupils must either change or die. In those ways, the marketplace can be a powerful force for education reform, yet today the entire strength of the public-school establishment presses on that door to keep it shut.

But—an important but—the public also has an interest in the quality of education, in ensuring that every child acquires essential skills and knowledge and that schools are accountable for providing these. The public also has the right to insist that those who receive public funds are accountable for their handling of those funds. Public authorities should therefore set standards for the educational performance—student achievement, above all—of all schools that receive public funding. (Private schools receiving no

public money are another matter. It's our view that the state has no proper authority over anything but health and safety in schools that it does not pay for.)

Public authorities should also ensure that suitable tests and assessments are given and that the results are available for all to see. The same authorities should be able to warn, intervene in, and if necessary withdraw public funding from any school that fails to meet those academic performance standards (as well as standards for safety and fiscal probity and an absolute prohibition of racial discrimination). That does not mean managing the schools, or telling them how to allocate their resources, whom to employ, or how or what to teach. No, the kind of standards-and-accountability we envision for public authorities has nothing to do with inputs, processes, or uniformity—that is the profound difference between reinvention and systemic reform. But it does preserve an important public role in education, in addition to—not instead of—marketplace forces.

> **Monopolies cannot be reformed, made efficient, or taught to behave. They can only be broken up. This is true of OPEC, Ma Bell, and public education.**
>
> Grover Norquist

During the past year, competition remained fierce between these two models of education reform. Today we sense that the reinvention model is ahead by a nose. Its progress is slow but real. During this same period, the systemic model suffered a symbolic but important defeat in Washington.

GOALS 2000 Amended

Little of note happened in education reform at the federal level this past year—a point we revisit in Part V, below. One substantial development, however, was the amending of GOALS 2000. As enacted in 1994, GOALS 2000 was the main jewel in the Clinton administration's education tiara. As enacted, it was also a near-perfect example of systemic reform, featuring, among other things: a new federal panel heavily weighted with special interests that critics warned would amount to a national school board; national and state opportunity-to-learn standards; federal approval of state reform strategies; planning committees whose membership was prescribed by Congress and tilted toward establishment interests; and prohibitions against states' use of federal funds for accountability purposes.

Many members of the 104th Congress elected in 1994, especially the feisty House freshmen, pledged during their campaigns to eliminate what they viewed as this big-government scheme to shackle the states, quash local control, and enrich established

interests. Like so much else planned by the incoming House, however, this quest ran headlong into the twin brick walls of presidential opposition and senatorial somnolence. By the time a budget agreement was finally reached, halfway into the new fiscal year, GOALS 2000 suffered only a tiny nick in its funding level.

In return for the money, however, congressional Republicans managed to exact significant modifications in the program that eliminated or weakened many of its intrusive features. Notably, the national school board was scrapped, as were opportunity-to-learn standards and mandatory federal approval of state reform plans. State central-planning committees are no longer required, and states may use GOALS 2000 money for such purposes as technology. A new provision allows local districts within a state that did not accept GOALS 2000 funding to apply on their own. Although tiny in fiscal impact, this provision effectively wipes out the fundamental idea of systemic reform, namely, that the entire state must act in concert on standards, assessments, teacher training, and so on. In other words, with this slight amendment, the central rationale for GOALS 2000 was blithely tossed aside and the program was turned into a pot of funds for generic school improvement. What remains? In a recent column, veteran Washington observer David Broder concluded: not much.

The District of Columbia

In early 1995, with the heady vapors of the 1994 election still wafting through the air, House Speaker Newt Gingrich launched a bold effort to improve the lot of residents of our nation's capital. For a still-wet-behind-the-ears Republican House to propose a total overhaul of a local government that makes some Third World bureaucracies look efficient by comparison was splendid and brave, if a bit naive.

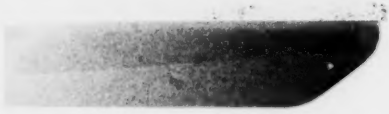
Education was high on the Gingrich agenda—the D.C. public schools being by common consent among the country's worst. The original plan developed by Representative Steve Gunderson (R-WI) included an array of far-reaching reforms, including independent charter schools, scholarships for low-income families to attend private schools, rigorous academic standards for student promotion and graduation, and start-up funds for a boarding school program for inner-city youths. It also included some spending increases for parent-literacy programs and facility improvements. The federal price tag was $15 million.

The House passed Gunderson's laudable plan intact as part of the District's annual appropriation, but the Senate included only a nod toward charter schools and a new commission to oversee the city's school board.

As expected, the sticking points in conference were private-school scholarships and the charter-school provision. To an amazing degree, education staffers working for Republican senators opposed Gunderson's plan and defended the union-backed status quo. Working hand in glove with House Democrats, they sought not only to scrap all scholarships for poor students, but also to water down the charter provision into meaninglessness. There ensued protracted negotiations between House and Senate, led by Senator James Jeffords (R-VT) and Representative James Walsh (R-NY).

One of the factors driving middle-class flight from the public schools is the search by parents for a safe and orderly school environment for their children. Unfortunately, this option is not available to children in families of more modest means. As a matter of simple social justice, we ought to ensure that all our nation's children attend schools that are free of drugs, violence, and disorder. I can think of few more compelling reasons to support the expansion of school choice than this.

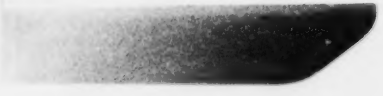
Wade F. Horn



In time, a charter-school program emerged from the conferees along lines similar to that in the House bill. Negotiations on the scholarship provisions stayed deadlocked, however, with Jeffords insisting that no funds be made available for "vouchers" while House negotiators, backed by the Speaker, stood firm. After months of stasis, pressure mounted on Jeffords, both in Washington and back home in Vermont. The agreement that followed contained major concessions by House Republicans, offering the D.C. city council a veto over the scholarship funds and allowing the District to receive its other new federal education funds even if it rejected the scholarships. To advocates of choice, the main virtue of this agreement was that it would have placed Congress on record in support of private-school scholarships for poor children.

The height of hypocrisy is for the president of the United States to send his own daughter to a private school while torpedoing legislation that would have empowered low-income families in Washington to exercise the same option. Apparently, political support from the national teachers' unions is more important than improving the life circumstances of children.

Wade F. Horn



Yet even this pallid compromise proved too much for national public-school interest groups, led by the teacher unions. Intent on expunging every trace of school choice, they mounted a full-court press against the entire $5 billion D.C. budget over an optional $5 million program offering tuition assistance to poor families. Senior White House aides had earlier indicated that the president (whose own daughter attends a well-regarded D.C. private school)

would "hold his nose" and sign a choice program. However, when informed that this issue was a top priority for the National Education Association (NEA) in an election year, the Clinton administration reversed course. The White House now lobbied Democratic senators to support a filibuster led by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) who, like the president and vice president, is deeply committed to public education for other people's children, but not for his own.

When presented by their colleagues in the House with an opportunity this year to expand choice for children in Washington's failing public-school system, members of the Senate refused to do so. Remarkably, only four members of the Senate sent their own children to D.C. public schools. The tacit assumption, of course, is that Washington's public school system is tolerable for poor children in the District of Columbia, but is not a serious option for members of the United States Senate.

Denis P. Doyle

As a result, Senator Jeffords, who thought he had assembled the requisite sixty votes to overcome the antischolarship filibuster, failed on four separate occasions to do so. Congress finally passed the charter-school provisions, along with some smaller reform measures (but no additional funding) as part of the government-wide appropriations bill signed by the president. The charter-school provisions in that bill constitute the only substantial reforms that Congress was able to enact for D.C.—not only in education, but across the policy landscape.

What to make of this saga? Obviously it reminds us that real education reform—especially that following the reinvention model, which threatens vested interests—takes Herculean effort to move an inch. But several lessons are brought into clearer view by the D.C. case. First, there is the increasingly partisan cast of the choice debate. Moderate Republicans voted for the bill while moderate Democrats—save for Bill Bradley, John Breaux, Robert Byrd, Jay Johnston, and Joe Lieberman—who had previously supported choice voted against even the mildest conceivable version of it. Second, we note the extreme, even desperate, nature of the opposition. Politicians from all corners of the nation voted to block the whole budget of our nation's capital—and threatened to do the same with the entire federal budget, if necessary—over an optional program of scholarships for fifteen hundred poor children trapped in one of the worst school systems in

Without the club of school choice, the teacher unions and education-establishment types would go tooth and claw at charter schools—and are doing so behind closed legislative doors.

Jim Bencivenga

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America. Third, we note the remarkable coalition that came together in support of this well-crafted bill, including the *Washington Post* and the mayor of D.C., Marion Barry (who called the Kennedy filibuster "a stab in the back"), as well as more predictable supporters of school choice. This hints that the public-school establishment, though still potent, increasingly faces challenge and dissent from those who ask a simple question: Why deny poor kids a chance to escape from a system incapable of educating them?

Charter Schools: Onward and Upward

The past year brought steady progress on the charter front, with seven more jurisdictions passing charter statutes (bringing the total to twenty-five states plus the District of Columbia) and many more charter schools opening. According to the Center for Education Reform, 269 such schools actually served over 60,000 youngsters in 1995–96 (as did other schools that resemble charters in practice but not in formal designation). Next year, between 350 and 400 are expected to be operating.

The new statutes were passed in New Jersey, Illinois, Florida, Connecticut, the Carolinas, and the District of Columbia. Meanwhile, a few states strengthened their existing charter laws. We also continued to learn more about this promising reform strategy from the Educational Excellence Network's own Charter Schools In Action research project, which issued a major Hudson Institute report this summer. (For copies, call 1-800-HUDSON-0.)

Charter schools remain a bright spot, but too many are "specialty" schools. What we need are stronger enterprises with innovative programs that stress the basics of reading, writing, and computation.

Rick C. Lavis

Last year we highlighted the difference between strong charter laws and Potemkin-style measures that feature a fine facade but contain no substantive reform. On the whole, the eight statutes enacted in the year prior to that report were fairly weak (save for those in Delaware and Texas). This year's new statutes are mostly a bit stronger, especially North Carolina's and the federal statute for the District of Columbia (though the latter's fate depends in large part on nominees picked by Education Secretary Dick Riley to serve on a new D.C. chartering entity).

Weak statutes typically feature no charter-approving entities other than local school boards, or inadequate ones; tight limits on who may apply for a charter (and how many charters can be issued); and insufficient autonomy from the statutes, rules, and contractual provisions that burden conventional schools. For charter laws now at least two years old, we're starting to see the results of a market test that separates weak from strong statutes. States with weak laws simply don't find themselves with many charter

schools in operation—Kansas has had such a statute on the books for two years and today has no charter schools at all—and those that exist have little practical autonomy, especially with respect to personnel and finances. To date, all but a handful of the charter schools in actual operation can be found in just six states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota. (In 1996–97, Texas will also gain a healthy crop under the stronger of that state's two charter provisions.)

While it is important to limit state intrusion, it is also necessary to give schools a helping hand. The charter concept is too important in the long run to simply hope for the best.

Rick C. Lavis

An important, if somewhat complicated, development is visible in the new statutes for Florida and D.C. Up to now, even states that permit a wide range of applicants for charters (such as private corporations) have defined their approved charter schools as a type of government entity akin to a local school district. This means the charter school is typically subject to the full set of policies and regulations that apply to government agencies, including competitive bidding requirements for purchases and prohibitions on owning property.

Florida's new statute establishes a special—apparently pathbreaking—category of "private" charter schools likely to avoid such difficulties. The D.C. law does not grant charter schools any particular legal status but stipulates that their governing boards shall incorporate as nonprofit organizations under D.C. law. Consistent with the reinvention model of education reform, we see little sense in burdening charter schools with unnecessary trappings of government agencies as long as their charter agreements spell out clear performance criteria.

Several states struggled against fierce opposition to improve their charter laws this year. Arizona amended its law to permit charters to own property and lengthened charter terms to fifteen years (both reforms seen by Arizona schools as critical for obtaining bank credit). In California and Massachusetts, however, efforts to strengthen charter laws have been blocked.

The schools themselves seem generally to be doing quite well, though they do not lack for start-up problems. The previously mentioned Educational Excellence Network report offers an extended analysis of those problems and cites evidence that charter schools seem to be proving their critics wrong about the kinds of kids who seek to attend them—and about the capacity of poor and minority families to make educational choices for their children.

Charter Opponents

The future prospects of charter schools seem bright, though it's too soon for hard data about actual results. If those results prove positive, and the number of charter schools continues to grow, the political battle will intensify. It's already hot, as regular schools see charters siphoning "their" resources, attracting "their" pupils, and generally showing them up. That's why charter caps, for example, remain so tight, funding so meager, and access to facilities so limited. In Hull, Massachusetts, this year, a charter school planning to lease space from a synagogue was stopped from doing so when the charter-averse local school board suddenly made a higher bid for the space.

Although such local confrontations illustrate the intensity (and ingenuity) of charter-school opponents, for the most part their strategy may be described as "caps, constraints, and co-optation."

By capping the number of charter schools permitted under state law, opponents mitigate their threat. Massachusetts failed this year to lift its twenty-five-school cap (though dozens more schools are ready to roll) and the better of the two Texas charter programs is limited to twenty schools. California has already bumped against its ceiling of one hundred—a paltry number in a state with more than seventy-three hundred public schools. (The State Board of Education has, however, used its broad waiver authority to grant a small number of charters in excess of that ceiling.)

Constraints on charter operations are numerous and varied. In some states they must pay union wages, in some they can hire only certified teachers, and practically everywhere they're obliged to deal with the same complexities of categorical federal and state aid programs as school systems with bureaucracies designed to handle such matters. The constraint strategy seeks to keep charter schools as much like regular schools as possible. It's sly, because many of these constraints are imposed in the name of "equal opportunity" or "level playing fields"—and siphon off money that should be devoted to instruction.

Even slier is the co-optation tactic, now practiced by both teacher unions and by some school boards. They're paying lip service to the theory of charter schools, even starting their own, but they're keeping those under tight control—and lobbying against everyone else's charters. Perhaps they're also hedging their bets. If the charter movement really flies, they're better off aboard than shaking their fists at it from the ground. Earlier this year, the NEA pledged $1.5 million to work with six of its own charter schools over the next five years, although its criteria for selecting such schools suggest that they'll enjoy very limited independence, especially when it comes to personnel.

The most substantial and exciting reform of K-12 education is developing school by school, supported with private funding from New American Schools. As the 1996–97 school year opens, over 350 schools have adopted one of NAS's seven new instructional designs.

James K. Baker

The next event to watch on the charter front is Washington State's charter-school Initiative 177. Developed by two plucky and determined parents, this far-reaching plan will be on the ballot in November. When the Washington legislature considered several charter bills earlier this year, it deadlocked. The matter thus comes before state voters in the form of a populist campaign, with money, organization, and the odds all favoring the opponents. Still, we'll be surprised if, one way or another, Washington does not have a viable charter program in place within the next year or so.

Contract Management: A Mixed Year

This was a turbulent but still promising year for private providers seeking to contract for the management of public schools. The industry's most visible player at the beginning of the year, Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI), has imploded, losing all its significant contracts. On the other hand, the Edison Project, led by entrepreneur Chris Whittle and former Yale president Benno Schmidt, is off to a strong start with its first four schools (rising to a dozen in September). Wall Street is increasingly fascinated by the potential of the $300 billion K-12 education market (the emerging "education industry" now has a monthly newsletter) and smaller firms are getting off the ground in Michigan, Massachusetts, California, and elsewhere. Companies that manage only "alternative" schools and supplementary programs (such as Title I tutoring) seem to be booming. Sylvan Learning Systems, for example, is rapidly growing and diversifying.

The biggest news was EAI's series of disasters. In November, EAI lost its contract to manage ten schools in Baltimore because the company was unwilling to accept a cut in its fee at a time when the city's school system was cutting nearly everything. (Some observers say that Baltimore, facing continuing union opposition and a mixed pupil-achievement record, precipitated the fee issue in order to get EAI to withdraw.) Then in January, EAI lost its remaining major contract in Hartford. Though the company now claims to have shifted its focus to suburban districts, it has yet to sign another contract and appears to face the prospect of no schools under its management in 1996–97.

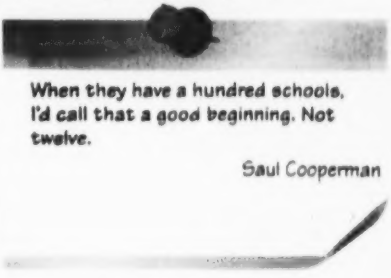
Not surprisingly, EAI's (numerous) critics and (fewer) supporters scuffled endlessly over the causes of the company's woes. Critics such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) pointed to what they claimed were inadequate test scores. EAI defend-

ers responded that the company wasn't given a supportive environment or adequate time to prove itself.

As far as we can make out, both critics and defenders have some valid points. Certainly EAI was trying to operate in inhospitable environments. Despite AFT claims that it tried to work with EAI, the Baltimore teachers' union opposed this effort from the start because the company replaced union paraprofessionals with nonunion classroom assistants who were college graduates. (The union had to make the embarrassing claim that college graduates were less qualified in the classroom than high-school graduates.)

Similarly, in Hartford, savings identified by EAI were reallocated—under intense union pressure—toward politically attractive purposes (salaries, mainly) rather than the technology that EAI recommended. It also seems clear that EAI tried to do too much too fast and forgot that deep education reform happens one school at a time. It was a vain hope that a private company could manage an entire district and thereby sidestep the deeply-rooted politics that make urban education rigid, bureaucratic, and antagonistic to reform.

As for the Edison Project—with which one of us was previously affiliated—that company has been managing schools for only one year, but what we've seen so far looks very good. (A front-page article by Peter Applebome in the *New York Times* in late June came to the same conclusion.) In the fall of 1995, Edison opened its first four schools, far fewer than the number originally touted by Chris Whittle. At all four schools—in Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and Kansas—students seem focused on learning a high-quality curriculum. The districts seem pleased and want the program to expand. The teachers are terrific. Parents are generally delighted. Waiting lists are long. The much-discussed individual computers really did go home with students. And Edison's contracts and charters for the coming year will triple the number of students served by its schools. The bottom lines—both student achievement and financial return to investors—are not yet visible, and more time is needed before declaring Edison a success. But things seem to be proceeding about as well as can be expected.



When they have a hundred schools, I'd call that a good beginning. Not twelve.

Saul Cooperman

Meanwhile, a new report from the General Accounting Office (GAO) examined four districts that had contracted for private management. In brief, GAO found that "although scores on standardized tests did not substantially improve . . . , the private management companies made changes that benefited students." Examples of such changes include college-educated teaching assistants, better student attendance, and

improved facilities and technology. The fact that GAO didn't look at private-management contracts begun in the 1995–96 school year, such as Edison, limits the worth of this report. But the finding of a number of positive outcomes resulting from EAI's contracts is significant, since opponents of contract management have sought to demonize EAI as a way of discrediting the whole concept.

Whichever firms are involved, private management portends big changes in familiar arrangements and assumptions. Leaders and investors in the "education industry" believe that the restructuring of this field over the next ten years will resemble that of the health care industry during the past decade, with similarly huge opportunities to participate in—and profit from—the top-to-bottom reshaping of an old, creaky, dysfunctional system. Opponents of contract management will continue to fight and to express their abhorrence of "profit," as if public education were not *already* a profitable, multibillion-dollar industry for textbook publishers, test-makers, school-bus companies, and other purveyors of supplies and services. And those that get to manage schools will be judged by their performance. That's the way it should be in every part of education.

In the old days, George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse doorway and told children they could not come in. Today, the foes of school choice stand in the doorway and say to the grandchildren of George Wallace's victims, "You cannot get out."

Grover Norquist

Given declining productivity and resistance by service providers to productive changes, the best hope is consumer sovereignty in the form of parental choice and competition among schools. It is increasingly apparent that private choices in free markets not only prove more efficient but also please consumers better than government-provided goods and services.

Herbert J. Walberg

Stasis on School Choice

Progress in advancing publicly financed school choice for poor children has stalled. Leaders of public education, while grudgingly giving ground on charters, have drawn a line in the sand when it comes to allowing poor children the opportunity to attend nonpublic schools of choice. This is lamentable, because the charter (and contract-management) concept, though promising, is too new to have been proved successful, while there is an overwhelming body of evidence attesting to the benefits of private schools, especially Catholic schools, in educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Denying such children the option of attending those schools means that the very

students whose needs are greatest are barred by a condition completely outside of their control—their parents' income—from access to alternatives that could improve their life chances and expand their educational opportunities.

Let poor families—not bureaucrats—decide the sort of school their children will go to, government or nongovernment, secular or nonsecular, as the case may be.

Denis P. Doyle

An interesting question now is whether the choice effort will be sidetracked—and charter schools promoted as an alternative. That would be a pity. We don't see charters and choice as mutually exclusive alternatives, but as part of a diverse set of strategies that should be available to meet the needs of today's children.

Charter schools may become a pressure valve reducing parental demand for real school reform.

Grover Norquist

The attempt by Congress to provide private-school scholarships for low-income District of Columbia students, though it ultimately failed, at least represented a serious effort in this arena. In the states, however, we see some slackening of effort on this front. For example, in Arizona and Pennsylvania, both sites of fierce choice battles a year earlier, we sense a new complacency (or maybe despair) on the part of reformers who seem more inclined to settle for charter-type programs alone. In Arizona, that complacency arose *after* enactment of a very strong charter bill, strong in large part because it was attached to a choice measure that drew many of the slings and arrows of the education establishment. In Pennsylvania, on the other hand, we worry that reformers' willingness to shelve the choice idea—without demanding anything in return—has allowed opponents to focus all their fire on weakening proposed charter legislation, so far with great success. In the present climate, choice may most realistically be seen as a stalking horse for charters. Eliminate the stalking horse, however, and charters fail, too.

Not all choice proponents have settled into complacency or succumbed to despair. Many of us have been regrouping, while advancing the privately funded school-choice movement.

Patrick J. Kelleher

The climate could shift dramatically if the courts okay the constitutionality of voucher programs in Wisconsin and Ohio. In both, opponents have turned to the courts to block what they couldn't stop in the legislature. As a result, Wisconsin's plan to expand Mil-

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On both the school-choice and charter-school trains, Minnesota drove the locomotive in the 1980s, only to retreat to the caboose when national attention turned to universal school choice in the 1990s. Look for Governor Arne Carlson to recharge a real school-choice debate in the North Star State during the legislature's 1997 session.

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

Advance the argument not on instrumental or efficiency grounds, but on the grounds of simple human decency. Only America denies the poor the right to attend the religious—or nonreligious—schools of their choice. We should support choice because it is the right thing to do.

Denis P. Doyle

waukee's voucher program to include religious schools has been enjoined. The state supreme court found itself deadlocked 3-3 on the program's constitutionality and sent the issue back to a lower court for trial. The trial court decision will doubtless be appealed all the way back to the state supreme court. (The church-state provision of the Wisconsin constitution is more restrictive than the federal First Amendment.) In Ohio, thousands of low-income Cleveland families—many more than the program can handle—have applied for scholarships up to $2,250, and some new private schools are opening to serve them. The first Ohio court ruling held that the program is acceptable under both state and federal consititutions.

Meanwhile, Hudson researchers David J. Weinschrott and Sally B. Kilgore report positive findings from their evaluation of a privately funded school-choice program in Indianapolis. After scrutinizing the program run by the Educational Choice Charitable Trust, the authors found that, although scholarship students transferring into private schools encounter initial difficulty in the early grades, "they soon begin to emulate the steady upward progress of students who were in private schools all along." This contrasts with the marked decline of Indianapolis public-school students at grades six and eight (typical of students in other urban systems).

The researchers sought to control for "selection effects" among scholarship families by tracking those who applied for tuition grants but were turned down because of lack of funds. The performance of students from such families matched the performance of other public-school students, suggesting that the private-school environment, not the parents' initiative, is why former public-school students do better in private schools.

To be sure, the Hudson team was studying a privately funded program, but at least it's an *actual* program. We're amazed by the amount of so-called research on school

choice that purports to study the negative effects of imaginary programs—so as to make sure that no one ever gets a chance to try them. Many academics seem to share the school establishment's sense of panic about even the palest shadow of choice. So they trash the concept itself, thus helping to prevent the creation of anything that, when studied, might actually yield useful information.

Since 1992, the privately funded choice movement has spread to twenty-three cities nationwide and now serves 9,950 low-income K–12 students.

Patrick J. Kelleher

More frustrating news on the choice front comes from New Jersey. Governor Christine Todd Whitman was elected with the support of Jersey City's mayor, Bret Schundler, in part based on her pledge to allow private-school choice in Schundler's community—and perhaps statewide. Yet she keeps deferring the choice issue, thus pleasing the powerful New Jersey Education Association (NJEA).

The implication that Governor Whitman has waffled is nonsense.

The administration has put the issue temporarily on the back burner in order to pass a landmark piece of legislation by a deadline of September 1996 imposed by the state supreme court. . . .

Second, it is true that the NJEA has strongly opposed private-school vouchers. . . . But it is also true that the leading advocates have been inept in building support, especially in Jersey City. . . .

Leo Kagnolz

Absent state action, Schundler sought private funds to help low-income families in his city afford a private-school education. PepsiCo agreed to set up a fund to do just that. But the giant corporation hadn't bargained on the wrath of the teachers' union, which began to harass the company and threatened a statewide boycott of its products. Vending machines were mysteriously vandalized. In an all-too-familiar corporate reaction, PepsiCo backed down. Poor children hoping to get a decent education were out of luck. Soft-drink sales and corporate image mattered more.

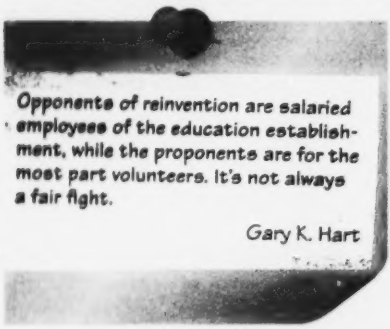
These were *private* funds. The NJEA seemed to be asserting that it no longer confines its sense of ownership to taxpayer dollars. Implicitly, it now signals that the kids themselves are its property and must be forced to remain in substandard schools even when a private benefactor is willing to pay to bail them out!

A panel appointed by Governor Whitman to study the choice issue recently completed its work. Chaired by the able former governor, Tom Kean, the panel came back with a strong endorsement of school choice as well as a policy proposal to implement

it statewide. We, and many others, eagerly await Governor Whitman's implementation of these recommendations.

Prospects for Reinvention

The recent death of Thomas Kuhn reminds us of just how big a deal a "paradigm" is, and how complicated, slow, and erratic is the shift from one paradigm to another. One of Kuhn's large insights in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was that two rival (and contradictory) paradigms can exist side by side for a long time during such a transition. In essence, the adherents of the old paradigm lose credibility and faith, as they did in the Soviet Union, and the system is gradually replaced by a better, more vigorous one.


Opponents of reinvention are salaried employees of the education establishment, while the proponents are for the most part volunteers. It's not always a fair fight.
Gary K. Hart

The reform paradigm we call reinventing education presently coexists with the systemic-reform strategy, which at least acknowledges serious flaws in the status quo. (Both coexist with the "things are basically okay, just send more money and they'll be even better" mindset, which defends the status quo.)

Besides the evidence offered above, we see three reasons for guarded optimism about the eventual triumph of the reinvention approach:

First, there is widening acceptance of the need for thoroughgoing structural change in education. In a perceptive little book called *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*, Kettering Foundation president (and former HEW secretary and university president) David Mathews reports that "Americans today seem to be halfway out the schoolhouse door." He attributes this disaffection mostly to people's direct experiences, not to media hype, cynicism, or right-wing conspiracy. Drawing on Kettering-sponsored research, he notes, for example, that "citizens complain that educators are preoccupied with their own agendas and don't address public concerns about discipline and teaching the basics. This lack of responsiveness is part of what convinces people that the public schools aren't really theirs." Mathews calls for "rechartering" public schools so they more closely and directly serve the interests and priorities of their customers and communities.

Such sentiments are backed up by other survey research, including both the annual Gallup opinion surveys and the splendid analyses by Public Agenda. People are restive both about the state of public education and about most educator-style schemes for

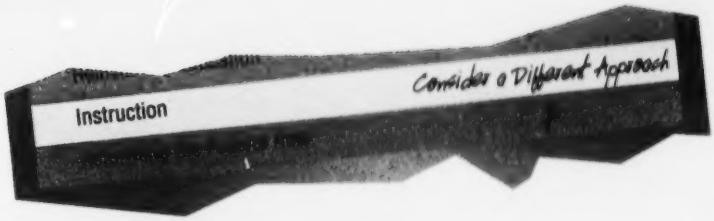
changing it. The public wants more control, more responsiveness, and more choices. And it wants its priorities, above all safety, order, and "the basics," honored.

More business leaders and governors are also embracing the elements of reinvention. Consider, for example, a fall 1995 survey of thirteen hundred local chamber of commerce executives across the country by two faculty members at Valdosta State University. Sixty-two percent of them declared themselves in favor of charter schools, two-thirds supported contract management of public education, and a whopping four-fifths endorsed vouchers. (The same survey reports that support levels among local school-board presidents were 43 percent, 28 percent, and 32 percent, respectively.)

Reinvention is even percolating through some of education's mainstream organizations. The Education Commission of the States, for example, recently released a first-rate report called *Bending without Breaking*, written primarily by Paul Hill, that explains how states can make the kinds of changes we favor—and do so under the big tent of public education.

Our second reason for (guarded) optimism is the accumulating precedents for reinvention to be found elsewhere. Who would have dreamed a decade ago that the U.S. health-care industry would change as dramatically as it has over the past ten years? Who could have imagined the large-scale changes in the communications, electronics, and entertainment industries? Who would have predicted that in less than a decade a quarter of all secondary schools in England and Wales would avail themselves of a charter-like option (called "opting out") and become essentially independent? Even Tony Blair, head of a Labour Party that for decades viewed education from the perspective of the teacher unions, now sends his son to one of these "grant-maintained" schools.

Third, the fundamental appeal of the reinvention paradigm for education reform is its deep compatibility with American democracy: with freedom, with control of our own destiny, with the power to choose how to live our lives and raise our children, and with our refusal to cede to bureaucrats, experts, and distant politicians the crucial decisions that most affect us.



Part IV: Instruction
The Tyranny of Dogma

While limited progress on standards and reinvention was visible this year, headway on another crucial front—instruction and curriculum—was harder to spot. To be sure, educators pay lip service to diversity and the uniqueness of each school, classroom, teacher, and pupil. When it comes to instructional philosophy, however, all the dominant approaches can be traced to a common ancestor: the progressive-education movement that arose in the early part of this century.

Strategies that heed this orthodoxy are described with such phrases as "student-centered," "child-centered," "learner-centered," "developmentally appropriate," "discovery-based," "self-directed," "constructivist," and the like. Their names, details, and emphases vary. These features, however, are less important than what their common dogma *excludes*. Practices that are deemed "teacher-directed" or "knowledge-based" or that involve "direct instruction" are most certainly *not* welcomed by contemporary instructional theorists. The pedagogic tent, it turns out, is not very big at all.

The reigning orthodoxy demands not only obeisance, but also the exclusion of dissenters. The results of rigorous studies and pilot projects that don't conform to progressive ideology are dismissed, while airy speculation, vacuous theories, and sloppy evaluations that buttress the prevailing wisdom are published in Ivy League education journals. Unproven methods are thus imposed on thousands of America schools. The failures that often follow are predictably attributed to lack of funding or time (no matter how much of

> **I continue to be struck by the inability of the educational establishment to change. They are simply stuck, imprisoned by their dogma and, more important, by an unwillingness to recognize how much we have learned about the education of children.**
>
> Rick C. Lavis

either was available). Other excuses include lack of faith, inadequate staff development, ignorant parents, or a malevolent society. Never is it admitted that the concept itself may be flawed and the method ineffective, much less that different methods were ruled out and never tried.

Our purpose in this section is not to denounce progressivism (or "constructivism," as it is most commonly termed in today's pedagogy wars), nor to advocate a memorizing, "Gradgrind," back-to-basics approach. We give no letter grade here. Our purpose is to denounce dogma and faddism; to urge true instructional diversity, flexibility, and respect for evidence; and to call to readers' attention the considerable merits of another approach that we have chosen to dub "instructivism."

Whole Language and California

Perhaps the most notable example of progressive dogma in action in recent years is the epidemic of "whole language-ism" that has gripped reading instruction in most of the nation, including our largest state. Now the results are in, and whole-language advocates are increasingly on the defensive.

In truth, the results have been in on reading instruction for decades, certainly since Jeanne Chall of Harvard University published *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* in 1967. Chall's plea for a balanced approach, including both phonics and literature, was echoed in 1984 by a distinguished panel of scholars from the National Academy of Education. Their report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, presented the results of a comprehensive review of research on reading. This, too, was ignored by whole-language zealots.

Earlier versions of whole language—such as "look-say"—had been tried and abandoned when they yielded unfortunate outcomes. (Look-say was, by the way, the pedagogical basis for the banal "Dick and Jane" readers.) Yet encouraged by near unanimity among educational theorists, California endorsed a curriculum framework for language arts that bought the whole-language philosophy; this framework then became the basis for statewide adoption of textbooks. The influence of these decisions reached far beyond California's borders, since the state contains 11 percent of the national enrollment and dominates the textbook market.

In embracing the whole-language philosophy, California virtually jettisoned explicit phonics instruction. By 1994, as reported by NAEP, the state's reading scores had dropped through the floor. When fourth graders were assessed, California ranked below all other states except Louisiana! This was true for every racial and ethnic group.

To his great credit, Bill Honig, former California superintendent of instruction (on whose watch the move toward whole language took place), recently set out to deter-

mine what went wrong and, along the way, to rediscover what is known about effective reading instruction. His excellent new book, *Teaching Our Children to Read*, concludes that a balanced approach is called for, one that includes both good literature and systematic phonics.

Today, some whole-language revisionists claim that their only purpose was to balance phonics instruction with an appreciation for literature. Would that it were true, because that combination—systematic phonics plus good stories and books—is exactly what works best for most youngsters. Savvy reading teachers have always known that such a blend is necessary—and that's what they practice when nobody is trying to shove a particular ideology down their throats. But the revisionists' claim just doesn't wash as an account of what whole language sought to do. In reality, leaders of that movement launched an all-out war on every kind of phonics and savaged Chall's work because she showed that research conclusively supports decoding.

In response to the glum NAEP results, the California legislature passed a law requiring greater attention to phonics and the state board of education adopted a policy endorsing a balanced approach that includes phonics instruction. Nebraska's state board has adopted a similar policy. Virginia now requires phonics in all language-arts classes. Elsewhere we can see signs of a pro-phonics countermovement.

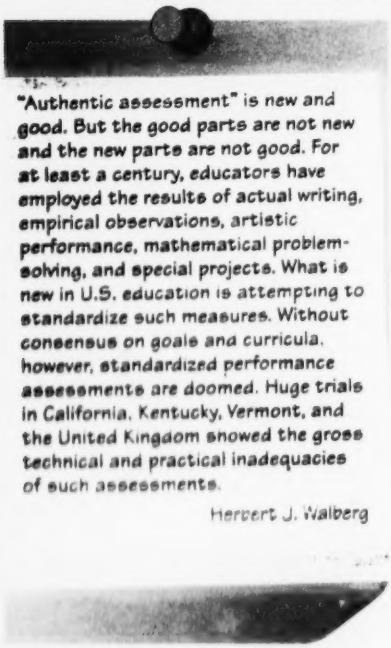
We are not admirers of the notion that legislatures should dictate pedagogy. We are not even sure that school boards should. Most elected and appointed officials don't have a clue how teachers should teach, and they should ordinarily keep out of the details of professional practice. However, when a state or local board has dictated a single method that has proven ineffective, it bears responsibility for rolling back its edicts. We *do* think that legislators (and citizens) also have a right to know about the performance of their schools, and in this case it is school performance that put egg on the faces of whole-language zealots. Still, the issue is not resolved. The zealots will be back, perhaps with a new label ("meaning-based" reading?). Our own view is that teachers should be free to use whatever methods produce the best results for their students. For most children—and teachers—that is very likely to be a version of the balanced methods urged by Chall, Honig, and others.

Mathematics: England Shows the Way

A similar debacle is brewing in mathematics instruction. This one, though, is subtler because in this field the regnant orthodoxy, the curriculum standards promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), has some genuine strengths. It emphasizes challenging content for all students, including young people who were traditionally served only a watered-down curriculum of "general" or "con-

sumer" math. To better prepare students for high-school math, the standards advocate early introduction of more advanced topics, including geometry, probability, and pre-algebra. We share the NCTM's conviction that serious math is not only for college-bound elites—and that it must address the challenges the real world presents, not just exercises on classroom work sheets.

But the instructional approach suggested in NCTM's curriculum standards, and elaborated more fully in that organization's 1991 teaching standards, does not lend enough explicit support to a balanced approach that includes strong computational skills as well as constructivist methods such as use of calculators in the early grades, problem-solving as the most "authentic" way to gain competency, and exploring students' attitudes about mathematics. Even more important, while NCTM theorists argue that their approach does not shun computation and basic math skills, NCTM math as *practiced* in many U.S. classrooms is often as neglectful of such skills as whole-language reading is of phonetically based decoding skills.



"Authentic assessment" is new and good. But the good parts are not new and the new parts are not good. For at least a century, educators have employed the results of actual writing, empirical observations, artistic performance, mathematical problem-solving, and special projects. What is new in U.S. education is attempting to standardize such measures. Without consensus on goals and curricula, however, standardized performance assessments are doomed. Huge trials in California, Kentucky, Vermont, and the United Kingdom showed the gross technical and practical inadequacies of such assessments.

Herbert J. Walberg

Aroused by reports of fourth and fifth graders counting on their fingers and relying on calculators for the simplest arithmetic tasks, parents around the country are forming protest groups. (This, too, is most visible in California.) Some mathematics experts are beginning to level serious criticism at NCTM math. University of Wisconsin professor Sara G. Tarver, for example, has criticized the NCTM standards for their inattention to computation skills and the lower standards they tolerate for mathematical speed and accuracy. Frank Allen, a former president of the NCTM itself, writes that "the secondary school mathematics curriculum must be organized around its own internal structure, and not around problem solving as the NCTM's 'Agenda for Action' requires. . . . Problems are the life blood of mathematics. But we must not fail to convey to our students that the body of mathematics is given structure and coherence by the bones and sinews supplied by definitions, postulates, and proofs."

With similar changes sweeping math education in England in recent years, it is instructive that the British government recently banned calculators from at least one of

its national tests and altered its math curriculum. The ensuing changes have been applauded by the London Mathematical Society, which was unhappy with the NCTM-style national curriculum because of its inattention to fundamentals:

> There needs to be more emphasis in national curriculum mathematics on important basic topics and on the acquisition of those techniques which will form a firm foundation for further study. . . . It is also essential that the exactness of mathematics and its notion of proof should not be distorted and that close attention should be paid to accuracy and clarity of oral and written mathematical communication, including the setting out of logical arguments in good English.
>
> Teachers would be greatly aided if the National Curriculum were more explicit about the basic facts, methods, and ideas which are fundamental to subsequent mathematical progress. . . .

Back in the U.S., the math education establishment continues to defend its favored approach, and many people cite "NCTM math" as a good example of what national standards should be. But the test of standards in this field must not be what they aspire to; what counts is how they affect students' ability to master mathematical skills. We grow more worried as we see the NCTM standards put into practice. We want to see them succeed, because strong math standards will help teachers and improve student performance, but it's time for a midcourse correction. In math, as in reading, students need a solid command of skills as well as opportunities to use those skills in challenging settings. Students cannot be good problem-solvers unless they possess deft, even semiautomatic, computational skills. NCTM has an obligation both to state unequivocally that this is its concept and to press for classroom practices that mirror this balance.

The Romance of "Natural" Learning

The "child-centered" version of progressivism from which so much of today's constructivism flows is hostile to standards, assessments, and accountability. In the child-centered classroom, teachers are supposed to "facilitate," not teach. Teaching is scorned as didactic, almost authoritarian. Objective knowledge is replaced by learner-constructed knowledge, as though each child is ideally situated to reinvent what has been painfully learned by humankind over the centuries. This philosophy flowered in the 1960s in "free" schools and "open" classrooms. It's back.

Constructivists like to think that they are lineal descendants of early-twentieth-century Progressivism, but even John Dewey went to pains to disassociate himself from the child-centered schools that claimed him as their inspiration. He wrote in 1926:

> There is a present tendency in so-called advanced schools of educational thought . . . to say, in effect, let us surround pupils with certain materials, tools, appliances, etc., and then let pupils respond to these things according to their own desires. Above all let us not suggest any end or plan to the students; let us not suggest to them what they shall do, for that is an unwarranted trespass upon their sacred intellectual individuality. . . .
>
> Now such a method is really stupid. . . . Since the teacher has presumably a greater background of experience, there is the same presumption of the right of a teacher to make suggestions as to what to do, as there is on the part of the head carpenter to suggest to apprentices something of what they are to do.

Of course, there are elements of progressivism that are sound: children do learn more when they are actively involved, rather than passive listeners; education does work best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding, rather than rote memorization. The wise educator uses experience, his own as well as the children's, to improve teaching and learning. Yet the progressive legacy has also left in its wake a strong bias against purposeful teacher direction of student learning, an unreasonable fear of the "teacher-dominated" classroom. Progressivists are also uncomfortable with the notion that youngsters in our complex society need to master a comprehensive body of knowledge and skills defined in advance by adults. When all else fails, progressivists sometimes claim that an externally managed learning environment is incompatible with the development of free personalities and democracy. Yet we can't figure out how a democratic society can expect to remain that way unless its members acquire a solid foundation of civic knowledge and democratic institutions—as well as the knowledge and skills needed to change their society as they see fit.

Three decades of research on children with conduct problems indicates that the most effective interventions are not counseling or other "talking" therapies, but high structure, clear rules, and immediate consequences. In the words of one researcher, what these youth need is not higher self-esteem but more self-control.

Wade F. Horn

Some of our own children attended excellent progressive schools In the hands of outstanding (and nondoctrinaire) teachers and supported by like-minded parents, this approach can work well. Over the decades, it seems clear that progressivism has been most successful with children who have grown up in privileged circumstances, whose parents are well-educated, and whose homes are filled with books and conversation

about the world. It seems to be least successful with disadvantaged children who need explicit assistance in mastering the secrets of language, mathematics, science, and other school studies.

In truth, progressivism didn't work with all "privileged" kids, just those who had advantages at home and were smart enough to do discovery learning.

E.D. Hirsch

Today the progressivist philosophy enjoys overwhelming dominance in American education at all levels (including universities). It comes close to being the profession's only approved curricular philosophy and pedagogical strategy. Certainly that's true within U.S. colleges of education. (We can think of just a couple of exceptions.) Such uniformity creates what could today be termed a regimen of approved thought about education: pedagogical correctness. Given its mixed track record, its unsuitability for many youngsters—especially the most disadvantaged—and the distaste with which many parents view it, we deplore the fact that it reigns supreme on these campuses, which can be thought of as the central nervous system of the education profession, the places where ideas and practices get validated. Worse still, with minor exceptions, the government now throws its powerful weight behind that philosophy—and only that philosophy, as we elaborate below.

The Instructivist Alternative

The reigning ideology routinely ignores and rejects alternative instructional strategies, no matter how well established by research. Ideally, education research should be experimental, pragmatic, open to new ideas, and willing to acknowledge the failure of practices that, after proper trials, turn out not to work very well. Unfortunately, many researchers prefer to seek validation of favored approaches, find excuses when they don't work, and reject findings that do not confirm their own biases. Because of the overwhelming preference for progressivism among education-school faculty, few researchers evince interest in what we now term "instructivist" programs, no matter how successful they appear to be, even with disadvantaged and low-achieving students.

Progressivism bypasses accountability; instructivism insists on it.

William J. Maloney

Variously called "direct instruction," "mastery learning," "explicit teaching," or "precision teaching," these classroom strategies have key points in common. Teachers who use them are specific about what students are expected to learn, and they communicate these expecta-

tions clearly to their pupils; virtually all school time and energy are focused on the desired learning; testing provides frequent feedback on progress; success is rewarded; failure is not accepted; and effort continues until the goals are attained.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of indifference to such results is illustrated by the fate of direct instruction (known in one version as DISTAR). Few schools or districts use it even though it was convincingly validated by a huge field test against a broad array of competitive methods. In the early 1980s, the federal government spent over a billion dollars on the massive "Follow Through" study, the most rigorous comparative evaluation of instructional strategies ever performed. Of the many strategies that were tried and studied, direct instruction and behavioral analysis were found to have much stronger impact than the rest. But because these generally instructivist approaches did not conform to the field's prevailing orthodoxies, researchers promptly sought to discredit or disregard the project's findings. Indeed, the journals of some of the nation's highest-status schools of education went on the attack as soon as the results were known. One suspects that if their preferred strategies had received high marks, the evaluation would have been hailed as a definitive breakthrough.

Despite their unpopularity among education-school faculty, instructivist methods seem to produce solid results, especially for children who need help in learning to read, write, and cipher. They start by assuming that the teacher knows something that children need to learn. They rely on carefully planned and purposeful teaching. They hinge, above all, on high-quality instruction by knowledgeable instructors. That's why we call this philosophy instructivism.

Clearly, instructivism works. Barak Rosenshine and N.L. Gage synthesized many studies that show pervasive beneficial effects in the major subjects in primary and secondary schools.

Herbert J. Walberg

Instructivist schools have a clear understanding of what their pupils should learn and how they are expected to behave. They believe that the teacher's most solemn job is to instruct the young in the knowledge, skills, and behaviors determined by adult society to be valuable.

Some successful schools today adhere to the instructivist philosophy, but such schools must usually struggle against the weight of received opinion, no matter how successful they may be. Today, for example, at the Barclay public school in Baltimore, inner-city students are taught using a curriculum carefully devised and refined over the decades by the nearby Calvert independent school, which for most of this century has sent Calvert-method materials and instructional strategies to homebound children and

families living in faraway places. When Gertrude Williams, Barclay's extraordinary principal, asked the system's administrators for permission to use the rigorous Calvert curriculum in her school, which was at the bottom of the barrel, she was turned down. She was told that it's a "rich man's" curriculum and therefore inappropriate for her pupils. But Williams refused to give up, and eventually Mayor Kurt Schmoke intervened to support her request. Today, Calvert provides daily lesson plans in each subject, monthly assessments of student progress, and constant correction of and feedback on student work. Despite some bumps, the Calvert curriculum has helped Barclay's students make significant achievement gains. Albert Shanker has termed Barclay "an extraordinary success story" and describes its results as "outcomes of which any school district in the country could be proud."

Baltimore is also a good place to observe another promising instructivist program. "Success for All" is a comprehensive package of scripted lessons for reading in the early grades, developed primarily by Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University. It includes pretesting, ability grouping and regrouping, frequent assessment of progress, and tutors for students who need extra assistance. Some of its elements are progressive, but the program's main thrust is decidedly instructivist. Under controlled testing, it has managed to get 60 percent of highly disadvantaged students up to the national norm (although some experts, such as Herbert J. Walberg, note that other evaluations show less impressive results for the program). Yet it is not widely used.

Nor are other successful strategies and methods with an instructivist bent. The excellent Core Knowledge program inspired by E.D. Hirsch is spurned by most U.S. schools and held in contempt by education professors because of Hirsch's insistence on spelling out in detail what children are expected to learn in each grade. In many of the between two and three hundred public schools where it is operating, however, student performance has been remarkable. And it is slowly spreading into more communities.

Thaddeus Lott's Wesley School in Houston, which serves one of the poorest neighborhoods in that city, has gotten terrific results with DISTAR and other instructivist approaches. Despite the fact that Lott took his school from the bottom to the top of Houston's rankings—a recent state accountability report identified Wesley as one of the best schools in Texas—district leaders have not replicated his approach. Indeed, they responded to the school's remarkable success by accusing the principal of cheating. The good news is that Lott is planning to take advantage of the new state charter law to open his own charter schools in Houston.

The most remarkable fact about successful inner-city schools like Barclay and Wesley and programs like Hirsch's is not that they exist, but that there is no effort by education professionals to beat paths to their doors and encourage the spread of their successful methods.

Despite the code of silence-verging-on-hostility toward such methods, individual teachers occasionally happen upon them. Thus the Washington Post reported in June on the remarkable transformation of Mark Lewis's second- and third-grade classroom in D.C.'s predominantly minority Garrison Elementary School, which boosted its test scores from the 35th to 75th percentile over the past year. Lewis is a former Library of Congress historian who turned to teaching four years ago. Appalled by his pupils' weak academic performance, he decided to change things. As he said to the reporter, "It was just hard-core reading, writing and math. It was fun, but it was intense. I also did something else. I kept injecting a belief in them. I kept saying, 'Yes, they can do it.' I was like Vince Lombardi. . . ."

Somehow the message sunk in. "Mr. Lewis said he believed in us," said Gerald Thornton, a third-grade student. "He kept saying we could do it. We kept doing what we could. If we would read an easy book, Mr. Lewis would say, 'Put down that easy book and get a harder book. You can do better.'"

Mark Lewis. Gertrude Williams. Jaime Escalante. Thaddeus Lott. Hundreds and thousands of similarly devoted if less celebrated educators. They practice instructivism and get good results. Attention should be paid.

The Case for Diversity and Balance

In contrasting constructivism and instructivism, our goal is not to banish the one or mandate the other. It's to appeal for tolerance of honest diversity in instruction, to argue against pedagogical orthodoxies of every kind, to urge respectful attention to what is actually known about what works with children, and to insist that no one size can fit all. Pluralism is important both because youngsters really do differ and because teachers should be seen as professionals, not robots to be programmed.

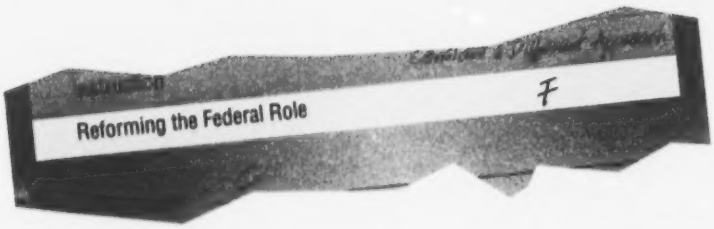
> **"Balance currently doesn't exist because it is not politically correct to talk about direct instruction in certain education circles, even though there is evidence emerging that such strategies are working well with disadvantaged students.**
>
> Gary K. Hart

Balance is important, too. Too much constructivism and we get kids who can neither read nor cipher though they may be inquisitive and overflowing with self-esteem. Too much force-feeding by teachers and we get kids who may know their multiplication tables and state capitals but are passive and unaccustomed to using their imaginations.

The very best teachers instinctively achieve such balance within their classrooms and fend off efforts to tip them in either direction. The very best teachers are slaves to

no one's dogma; they are able to use constructivist and instructivist methods as the child, the subject matter, and the situation require. But today the profession, the system, and the government support only one approach, which makes it an orthodoxy rather than a tool in the educators' kit bag and means that the teacher who wants to use diverse methods is up against a powerful combination.

In most U.S. schools and classrooms, therefore, imbalance means too much progressivism and too little instructivism. It's the latter that must fight an uphill battle against pedagogical correctness. We don't think that states or districts (much less the federal government) should impose it, but we suggest that it is an important component of almost all good teaching.



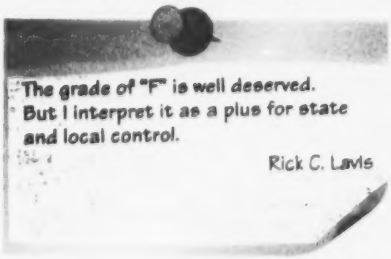
Part V: Reforming the Federal Role

Little Ventured, Nothing Gained

In our report a year ago, we gave "reforming the federal role" an "incomplete," commenting that "we did not anticipate the political sea change of 1994, the implications of which (for educational structures, programs, power, and spending) are still being explored and the outcomes of which are anything but clear."

The outcomes are now painfully clear and the only grade we can honestly give is "F," signifying that no credit has been earned by either the legislative or executive branch of the federal government.

To all intents and purposes, when it comes to education, nothing in Washington has changed. Billions of dollars still subsidize established interests—billions that do children little or no good. Billions still support outmoded and sometimes harmful programs. Federal red tape still shackles states and communities and schools that would like to innovate. None of the major federal programs is anything but a bureaucratic dead weight on those seeking to reinvent education. Federal dollars and rules buttress progressivist dogma. Federal efforts on behalf of the standards movement have been feckless. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has been undermined and underfunded. The Department of Education endures unchanged.



Both political parties have turned in miserable performances at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Even an honest attempt to reconstruct the federal role would warrant a "D." But we've seen no such effort.

To be sure, education is the constitutional responsibility of the states. Washington is the junior partner. Still, it accounts for 6 or 7 percent of the money (for public schools), it's the tail that wags the dog, and it has considerable influence over attitudes and expectations.

We have three large criticisms of the present federal role in education.

First, it is archaic. What Washington does in education today is essentially the same as a year ago, which means virtually the same as thirty years ago. Though the seeds of federal involvement with education were sown in the nineteenth century, Uncle Sam's present role was shaped during the 1960s. Most of today's programs continue to reflect the assumptions of that era, when it was widely believed that the nation's premier education problems could be solved by pumping federal dollars into more services, bringing enlightened practices to benighted states and communities, and imposing Washington's will on backward school districts.

One need not dispute this mid-sixties reasoning. There were genuine access and equity problems at the time; people had fewer sources of information; and in parts of the land there was blatant discrimination against minority youngsters, disabled youngsters, and others who were denied full access to educational opportunity. It was not unreasonable to enlist the national government in curing such ills. But our country and world have changed a great deal in the last three decades. The essential nature of the education problems facing the United States in that world is very different. Yet today we still find ourselves with federal programs conceived for the purposes of a generation ago.

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, few children with disabilities have actually been excluded from public education. Unfortunately, IDEA has been implemented in such a fashion as to underserve those truly in need of special education by so drastically expanding the definition of "disability" that the term has been rendered essentially useless.

Wade F. Horn

Today's premier education problems are mediocrity, under-performance, low standards, slavish adherence to ineffective instructional strategies, and a rigid, bureaucratized, producer-oriented, one-size-fits-all delivery system. They're entirely different from the crises of the mid-sixties. That means not only that Washington's interventions are unhelpful in solving today's problems, but that they frequently exacerbate those problems. They create perverse incentives (such as rewards for classifying more children as learning-disabled or limited-English-proficient) and impede efforts to experiment with concepts like school choice on even a limited scale.

Most federal programs are still based on the assumption that states and communities are ignorant and backward. Yet today many of those very states and communities are taking the lead in transforming their schools. Moreover, in an age of CD-ROMs, online information services, faxes, e-mail, cable television, conference-calling, and widespread travel, educators throughout the land have easy access to all the knowledge and expertise they can use. They don't need to get it from Washington.

While education is a national issue, it is a local responsibility. Federal remedies are barriers to needed innovation and reform, not the solution. The federal role should be minimalist and noninterventionist. Schools and the communities they serve are the appropriate locus of decision-making.

Denis P. Doyle

The biggest example of a misconceived federal program—and the largest single program at the Education Department—is Title I, accounting for $7.2 billion in the fiscal 1996 appropriation. It has changed its name a couple of times and gone through eight major reauthorizations (most recently in 1994), but the essential program dates to 1965. Close to $100 billion has been spent on it. The underlying rationale was, and remains, meeting the "special educational needs of educationally deprived children" by providing their schools with additional money for "compensatory" services such as tutoring.

Cautionary notes were sounded at the outset, especially about the shift of power and control to Washington. In their minority views on the 1965 bill, for example, eight Republican House members termed it "the most direct and far-reaching intrusion of Federal authority into our local school systems ever proposed in a bill before Congress." They were not crying wolf.

Title I funds are wasted often, but not always; schools serious about reform can and have used such funds to initiate and sustain successful strategies.

Gary K. Hart

Thirty years later, the money is greater, the stakes are higher, the statute is far more prescriptive, and the accompanying regulations are truly voluminous. What has $100 billion accomplished during these three decades? The rapid expansion of remedial courses in higher education is one indicator of failure at lower levels. The unimpressive (some said alarming) results of the National Adult Literacy Survey, released in 1993, were another. The Education Department was refreshingly candid that year when it explained why Title I should be reformed yet again by arguing that it was not accomplishing much:

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> Chapter I [the program's former name] is no longer closing the gap between disadvantaged students and others. . . . The progress of Chapter I participants on standardized tests and on criterion-referenced tests was no better than that of nonparticipants with similar backgrounds and prior achievement. . . . Chapter I has little effect on the regular program of instruction. . . . Chapter I frequently does not contribute to high-quality instruction. . . . Chapter I is not generally tied to state and local reform efforts. . . .

The authors of that report and myriad other evaluations naturally intended their gloomy conclusions to justify still more changes in the federal program. The president's FY '96 budget predictably asserted that the program will henceforth be more effective.

For twenty years, evaluations have shown that children are often better off in regular education than in such categorical programs. These programs add costs and administrative distractions but often actually detract from results, even after years of promises to do better.

—Herbert J. Walberg

Possibly. But it is well to pause and ask whether this much-revised federal education program does not, in one key respect, resemble the oft-reformed welfare program: Washington policy-makers have tried time and again to revamp it so that it will actually accomplish its intended purposes, yet none of these repairs, now spanning thirty years, has solved the basic problem. Should we attempt yet again to fix it in Washington and then pour resources into it for four or five more years, until the next round of evaluations tells us, oops, sorry, bad news, once again we conclude that the program is ineffective? Or should we consider an altogether different strategy?

The sums involved are substantial. If the money being spent on Title I in fiscal 1996 were targeted to the lowest-achieving 10 percent of U.S. students, it would work out to almost $1500 per child. That's enough for states and communities to experiment with bold strategies—strategies that would grow even bolder if they added their own funding.

New thinking is needed. Yet every proposal to "voucherize" or "block grant" Title I has been met with outrage. Any such change would shift power from producers to consumers, from Washington to communities and parents, from bureaucrats to teachers. So the status quo preserves ineffective programs based on outdated assumptions. And because there are so few honest evaluations of them—and because those that are conducted never make the nightly news—the public gets practically no valid information

about the program. Instead, those who propose new strategies are attacked by protectors of the status quo as being antieducation. That's what appears on the evening news.

Second, Washington subsidizes complacent establishment interests rather than consumers and reformers, and thus retards the reform process. Nearly all the federal aid-to-education money goes into the pockets of adults removed by a layer or two (or ten) from direct contact with kids. None goes to parents. Only the tiniest dribble goes to charter schools and other products of the movement to reinvent, diversify, and pluralize education.

Though it has little authority over standards, the U.S. Department of Education has vast power to reduce efficiency. It imposes many complicated and ever-changing regulations on state and local schools. State agencies add to these, as do local boards. Too many cooks not only spoil the broth but also make for huge costs in nonteaching staff—25.1 percent of current expenditures for U.S. schools vs. a 13.4 percent average for members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Herbert J. Walberg

Consumers today have very different ideas about education reform than do the "experts" and bureaucrats who receive Washington's money. The federal government's deference to producers serves to shore up the status quo. It also underwrites bureaucracy and subsidizes the very organizations that lobby it for more money.

The "Regional Educational Laboratories" ("the labs," as they're known inside the Beltway) illustrate the point. By federal standards this is a small program—just $51 million in 1996, up from $41 million the previous year—but it's a classic, an array of middleman organizations that have been on the federal dole since Lyndon Johnson occupied the Oval Office. Total expenditures: more than half a billion dollars (not counting substantial other federal funds that the labs have attracted). Total benefit: practically nothing.

It's not easy even to explain what the labs do. Their designers in the mid-sixties visualized organizations that "would develop and disseminate ideas and programs for improving educational practices throughout the country."

What emerged instead was a collection—now ten—of smallish nonprofit organizations, each located in a different region, that undertake a mishmash of research, dissemination, and technical assistance activities, aimed mostly at state and local education agencies.

This may have been defensible thirty years ago, when many state and local education agencies had meager research capabilities and information could not be obtained via computer disks or web browsers.

Times have changed. Some of the labs' technical assistance is still marginally helpful. But the program as a whole has outlived whatever justification it once had. Today the country is awash in education organizations, journals, cable channels, and web sites that supply information, advice, and technical assistance.

Federal funding of the program is a textbook case of what Senator Daniel P. Moynihan has termed "feeding the sparrows by feeding the horses." The putative beneficiaries are schoolchildren who need to learn more. Yet the money actually goes to well-paid professionals functioning as middlemen, sitting in comfortable offices distant from the classroom, and devoting much of their energy to ensuring that their federal gravy train does not halt on the tracks.

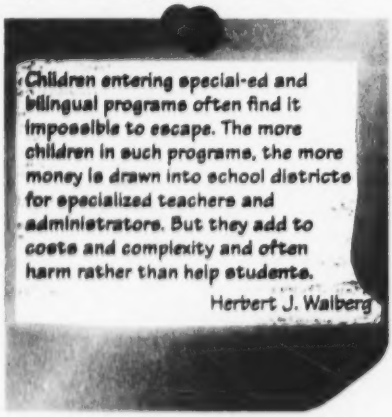
Third, Washington buttresses educational dogmas that are often politically motivated and frequently at odds with the concerns of parents and communities. It underwrites and legitimizes only one side of pedagogical debates. Federally funded R & D centers at elite colleges of education are a major factory for the dissemination and replenishment of the one-sided progressive philosophy. The new, congressionally mandated policy board for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement is dominated by representatives of the same elite institutions that are already funded by the federal government, thus ensuring that no dissenting ideas will be considered or unconventional projects supported.

An even bigger example of Washington's support for a politicized program is bilingual education. The program makes it abundantly clear that Washington enforces an orthodoxy that is contradicted by research, despised by parents, and harmful to children, yet beloved of certain interest groups.

Washington's involvement with bilingual education dates to 1968. Approximately $3.8 billion in federal funds will have been spent for this purpose by the end of the 1996 fiscal year.

The typical taxpayer supposes that the point of this program is to teach English as quickly as possible to immigrant and refugee children who arrive in the United States speaking another language. The typical parent of such a child wants the program to do precisely that. But that isn't how most bilingual educators see it, nor is it, in fact, how the federal program operates. Of equal or greater significance to them is retention of the child's original culture and improvement of his native language. That language is used for a long period as the primary vehicle of instruction, and only very gradually does

the child develop English fluency. Many bilingual educators are more interested in sustaining the ethno-linguistic, cultural, and political distinctiveness of immigrant populations than in their rapid assimilation into the mainstream. Indeed, many bilingual educators think that rapid assimilation into the mainstream is harmful, no matter what parents may want. Some bilingual programs scoop up kids even if they are more proficient in English than in Spanish (or another language) and then make it difficult for them to exit the program. It is hard to see the benefits of bilingual education for the Hispanic students who are numerically the largest recipients of the program, because they have the highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group. This may be an understandable response to a program that isolates them for five or six years without teaching them the English that they need for higher education or good jobs.


Children entering special-ed and bilingual programs often find it impossible to escape. The more children in such programs, the more money is drawn into school districts for specialized teachers and administrators. But they add to costs and complexity and often harm rather than help students.
Herbert J. Walberg

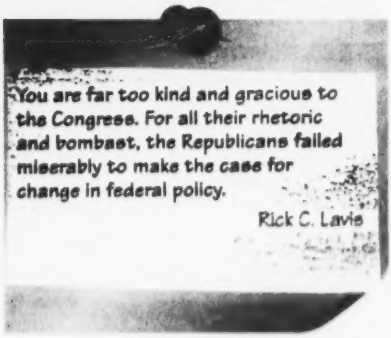
A close reading of the Clinton administration's 1996 budget justification for the bilingual program revealed not a word about English fluency. Instead it talked of "high-quality instructional programs for recently arrived immigrants and other limited English proficient students."

Indeed, Congress has restricted how much money can be used for the kinds of programs that promote rapid English acquisition and fluency (such as "English immersion" or "English as a Second Language" [ESL] approaches). Only 25 cents of the federal bilingual dollar may be spent for such programs. At least 75 cents must be used for the approach called "transitional bilingual education," in which the native language is used as the main instructional medium, often for many years.

What difference does it make? A New York City study found that youngsters enrolled in ESL programs acquired English faster, were able to test out of the program sooner, and earned higher test scores than those enrolled in bilingual programs. (This finding held even when initial language facility was factored in.) And an analysis of the research literature by Christine Rossell found that most studies show transitional bilingual programs to be "no different or worse than . . . doing nothing." Yet that's where the lion's share of the federal money goes today, as it has since the program began.

What We Think

Let us be clear. We do not object to federal aid for education, particularly for the education of poor and disadvantaged children. In fact, we would like to see more of the federal education dollar targeted to children and teachers rather than program administrators and overhead. We do not want to eliminate the federal role in education; it's hard to imagine some of its elements, such as civil-rights enforcement and statistics-gathering, being done anywhere else. We are not keen to cut the education budget in order to support pork-barrel projects in the hometowns of election-minded Congressmen. We think education is more important—so long as the funding accomplishes something for kids.


You are far too kind and gracious to the Congress. For all their rhetoric and bombast, the Republicans failed miserably to make the case for change in federal policy.
Rick C. Lavis

At the same time, we've spent enough time in Washington to see that much of what passes for "aid to education" is just subsidies for special interests, that too little of the money reaches the classroom, and that what gets there is usually bound in so much red tape or ideology that it's more hindrance than help. We have worked at the Department of Education and conclude that, despite the earnest efforts of some dedicated people there, that organization bears no relationship to the cause of school reform. Except for a very few specific areas—we've already mentioned civil rights and statistics—where the federal government plays a necessary role, the greatest good that Washington could do the cause of education reform would be to place resources in the hands of those who actually want to reform it rather than those who want to keep it the way it is. That argues for a fundamental shift in Uncle Sam's thirty-year-old approach to education. Yet it's precisely that shift—from producers to consumers, from special interests to reform-minded states and communities, from uniformity to pluralism, from top-down to grass-roots, from feeding the horses to feeding the sparrows, from red tape to freedom—that Congress and the executive branch have failed to make. Indeed, they haven't even seriously begun.

We're not too surprised that the Democrats were inclined to keep things much as before; they built this edifice and think they own it. (The Democratic-majority 103d Congress even renamed the Chapter I program "Title I" to show that it was reverting to its 1960s origins.) But the GOP is a disappointment. After a bold (or at least bold-sounding) start, the 104th Congress did nothing. It bungled some issues (e.g., school lunches), it failed to articulate a coherent vision, and in its zeal to cut the budget it managed

to get politically outflanked by astute Democrats who depicted the GOP as antieducation and antichild. Being unable to explain what they were for in this area, the Republican leadership backed off and agreed to nail a few more supports onto the Democrats' shaky edifice.

The 1996 Election

A national election should be a time to think things through, contrast alternate philosophies, and compare rival strategies. When it comes to education, however, what looked a year ago like a clarifying realignment of party positions has blurred considerably. President Clinton has rhetorically appropriated a number of traditionally Republican issues: discipline, standards, uniforms, charter schools, accountability, even (briefly mentioned at Palisades but never since) teacher competence. He also bowed to criticism of his hallmark GOALS 2000 program and consented to amend it into triviality. Politically he's been very shrewd.

Some say a battle is raging for the soul of the Republican party, a battle between the business-as-usual crowd and the radical reformers. So far, business-as-usual seems to be winning with respect to education. But the presumptive presidential nominee, Bob Dole, despite having paid little attention to these issues while in Congress, has begun to discuss them in bold language and to suggest some promising, consumer-oriented reforms. We hope to hear more from him on standards, accountability, and the reinvention of primary and secondary education in general and the federal role in particular.

It would be a pity for this election not to highlight the choices the nation faces in education, which polls say many Americans deem one of their foremost concerns. Common sense suggests that our society, economy, civic life, and culture will be improved if everyone has higher levels of skills and knowledge. The issue ought to be not who will promise to spend more on the status quo, but who has better ideas about getting federal mandates and regulations out of the way of innovation and effectiveness. The nation would benefit from a lively debate about rival paradigms of school reform, about two very different conceptions of Washington's place in this, and about the proper balance of education power and authority between producers and consumers. These are important alternatives that voters deserve a chance to choose between. We'd never say that national elections should be decided on the basis of education alone, but it certainly ought to be a factor.

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The Educational Excellence Network

The Educational Excellence Network's origins date to 1981, nearly two years before the nation was declared "at risk" by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, when Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn realized that something was sorely amiss in American education and, with a number of like-minded colleagues, resolved to do something about it.

They observed that most youngsters were not learning nearly enough; that many of those entering college and the workforce were ill-prepared; that key achievement indicators (such as SAT scores and National Assessment results) had been declining for at least a decade; that the stunning economic success of other countries usually had much to do with the rigor of the education systems; and that quality and standards were sorely lacking through most of America's K-12 schooling.

What to do? First, get the ideas right and put timely information into the hands of those who need it. The Network's founders agreed on a clear, strong statement of principles to guide the renewal of American education. They began a monthly publication called *Network News & Views*, which today has more than 1,200 subscribers. Over the years, the Network also undertook a number of special projects and studies, yielding half a dozen books and reports. In addition to *News & Views* and these annual report cards, current Network projects include a major study of charter schools in seven states and an interactive web site (on which this report, and many others, can be found): http://www.edexcellence.net

The Education Policy Committee

The Educational Excellence Network's 48-member Education Policy Committee (EPC) advises Network leadership and the parent Hudson Institute on priorities for Network activities. Perhaps more importantly, it brings together distinguished crusaders for educational excellence who are important allies and major assets in the quest for bold reforms of the kind indicated by the Network's principles.

The EPC was established in 1994 to rebut antiquated ideas, advance the Network's precepts, and carry the banner for educational excellence. It is not a political force—it does not endorse or lobby for bills—so much as a battalion in the war of ideas. Consisting of visible, vocal, respected reformers—including two former U.S. secretaries of education, state-level pioneers, professional educators, and distinguished scholars, critics, and advocates—the EPC and its members, individually and collectively, seek to advance a reasoned, forceful case for true education reform.

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